

“Historical Networking and the Institutionalization of History Culture in the Early Republic”

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I'd like to begin by talking a little bit about this idea of “history culture,” which framed my dissertation and current manuscript project. “History culture” is a concept that emerged a few decades ago in Europe primarily through the work of the German scholar, Jörn Rüsen.¹ Put simply, history culture is an umbrella term that goes beyond simply looking at traditional historical works or historiography by incorporating all representations and uses of the past in a given society's cultural production and that can include texts and art in any form as well as material culture. Much like print culture, it also goes beyond tangible texts and materials to include the relationships and networks that foster historical cultural production as well as institutions created to preserve the past, and it is the relationship between those two in the early national period that will form the basis of this paper.

But before I get into that I want to offer a brief manifesto for this concept of history culture and its application to early America. Memory studies, which forms a significant part of history culture, has carved out a niche in early American history, though by no means did the field experience the so-called “memory boom” many other fields did in the 1990s. Yet if a look at the current projects of those on this panel, this conference's program, which has no less than five panels devoted to memory or history in some form, and recent ASECS conference programs,

1. Jörn Rüsen, “Was ist Geschichtskultur? Überlegungen zu einer neuen Art, über Geschichte nachzudenken,” in *Historische Faszination. Geschichtskultur heute*, ed. K.Fußmann, H.T.Grütter, J.Rüsen (Köln: Böhlau, 1994), 5. Also, see Fernando Sánchez Marcos, “Historical Culture,” *Cultura Historica*, accessed July 10, 2016, http://www.culturahistorica.es/historical_culture.html; Michael D. Hattem, “Past and Prologue: History Culture and the American Revolution” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2017), 6-11.

is any indication, we may be currently experiencing a mini-memory boom in early American history.²

“History culture” can help us conceptually organize how we think about this growing literature while also offering pathways to new threads of scholarship that can illuminate the broadest issue at stake in history culture studies, i.e., understanding a given society or culture’s relationship to its past. How did people in early America shape, understand, relate to, and use their multiplicity of pasts and how did those understandings, relations, and uses change over time? My paper will give one example of how employing history culture as an organizing concept can help us see connections and relationships between various topics that might otherwise remained obscured.

My own work has focused on the role of history culture in the American Revolution broadly speaking. Historians have long argued that the Revolution “liberated [Americans] from the past.” The early republic is supposed to have been filled with Crevecoeur’s “new men” who, like Thomas Jefferson, supposedly liked the dreams of the future better than the history of the past. But my work argues that the Revolution actually made the past matter more than ever

2. On theorizing collective memory and its methodology, see Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1386-1403; id., “Memory and the History of Mentalities,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 77-84; Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-133; Peter Burke, “History as Social Memory,” in *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 97-114; *The Collective Memory Reader*, eds. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Patrick H. Hutton, “Recent Scholarship on Memory and History,” *The History Teacher* 33, no. 4 (2000): 533-548; Karen E. Till, “Memory Studies,” *History Workshop Journal* 62, no. 1 (2006): 325-341; Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Jacques Le Goff, “Mentalities: A History of Ambiguities,” in *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*, eds. Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 166-80; Duncan S. A. Bell, “Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 63-81; Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002): 179-97; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A Coser (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992).

before. It is clear that in the decades immediately following the Revolution, Americans created and consumed an unprecedented amount of historical cultural production—i.e., any cultural production broadly conceived that draws on historical themes, knowledge, or interpretations. From explosions in the publication of historical works to their serialization and excerpting in growing numbers of newspapers and magazines, to the importance of historical themes in the emergence of American letters and art and the rise of the first institutions established to preserve and interpret the past and the new national historical narrative being created, it seems clear that the past mattered greatly to Americans in the early republic.

This rapid expansion of historical cultural production in the early republic raises at least two questions. One, *why* did the expansion occur (which I argue in my manuscript was in no small part down to the Revolution)? And, two, *how* did it occur, which I want to address here. I think many of us have a sort-of romantic perception, if any, of, say, how historians went about their work in the eighteenth century. I'd suspect we'd be most likely to picture a wealthy elite male in a well-furnished room illuminated by candlelight, surrounded by books, and sat at a desk armed only with quill, and ink. But the reality of historical cultural production in the early republic was not nearly so romantic or solitary.

Beginning before the end of the war, an informal historical network developed that included dozens of individuals, among them historians, antiquarians, educators, poets, essayists, artists, politicians, printers, publishers, and booksellers, the vast majority of whom could be described as “cultural nationalists” (see fig. 1). Largely through their correspondence, they created an informal network, a web that fed or touched almost all forms of cultural production and spanned most regions of the new nation. Indeed, the network's participants produced a significant proportion of the most important historical cultural production in the period. Without

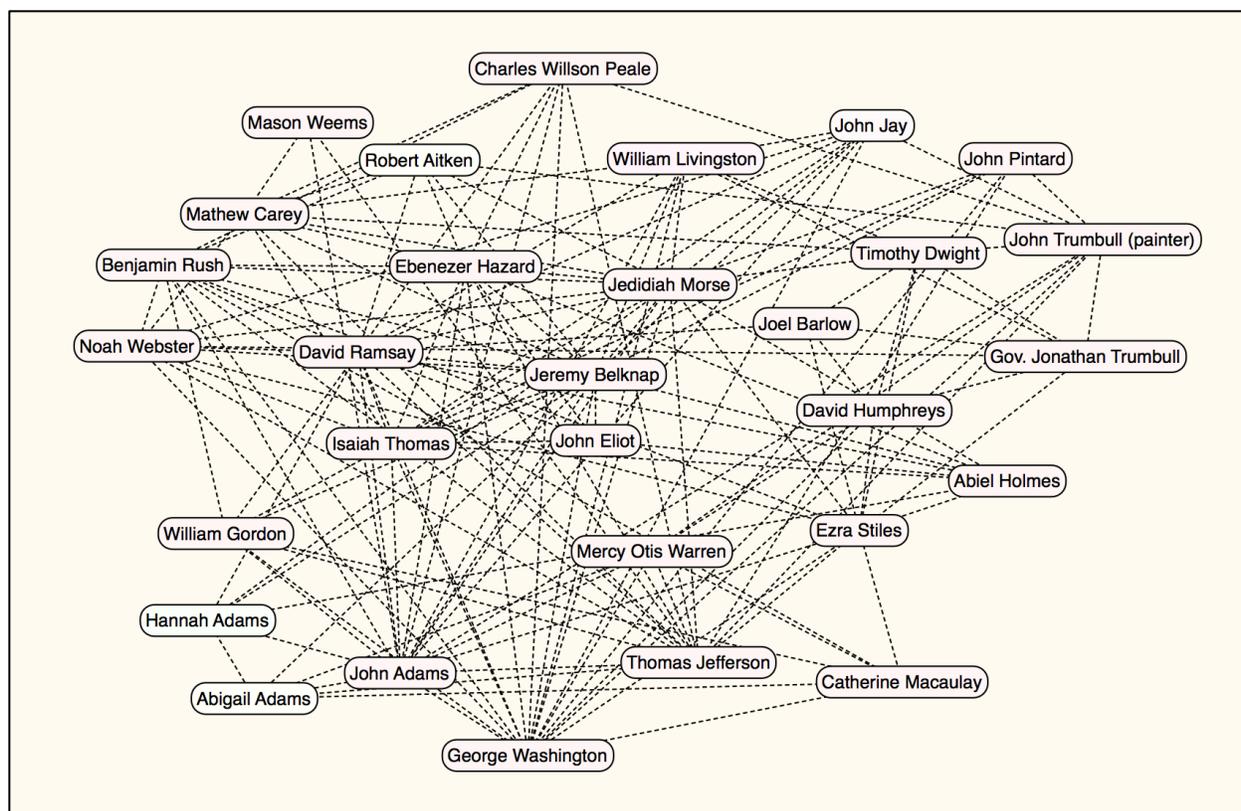


Figure 1. Lines connecting network participants represent the existence of correspondence between them specifically related to one of the three primary purposes of the network described in this paper.

any type of institutional support, participants used the network for a number of functions related to supporting their work from its earliest research phases to conception and writing through to publication and promotion. The three primary purposes the network served can be described quickly as: research or access to sources, feedback on writing, and publishing.

First, participants shared historical sources they had collected and transcribed, as well as news and leads on sources in which others might be interested. Historical research in this period was not for the faint of heart. Primary sources did not come cheap. Without any central repositories, private citizens held many important historical documents, often unknowingly. Historians in this period had no easy way of knowing whether a document they were looking for was even extant. Tracking down documents required both detective and social skills, as well as

unrelenting commitment. With the rise of antiquarianism, writing history in this period also required knowing who else was researching and collecting documents. Therefore, relationships between historians and antiquarians were crucial to both historical research and the production of historical works in this period. Jeremy Belknap and Ebenezer Hazard were a perfect example of this type of relationship within the network. In the 1780s, Hazard used his travels as Postmaster General to collect documents related to the New England Confederation of the 1640s. The two corresponded about potential leads and successes. Because “collecting” more often than not meant transcribing documents rather than keeping them, this work took a tremendous amount of time and effort. In a 1781 letter to Belknap, Hazard detailed his progress (and dedication), writing, “My transcript is contained in two 4to volumes, the first of 242 pages, and the other of 399. The last is what I have lately transcribed.”³ Despite the immense amount of “labor and expence” involved in transcribing these hundreds of pages of documents, Hazard had “no objection” to sending them to Belknap.⁴ Without institutional repositories for historical documents, individual historians and antiquarians spread throughout the country had to collect, transcribe, and preserve them through their own efforts, at their own expense. Many, like Belknap and Hazard, also made those documents available to others engaged in these kinds of historical endeavors. (8:40)

3. Ebenezer Hazard to Jeremy Belknap, April 17, 1781, Series I, Numbered Volumes I, 1637-1872, Jeremy Belknap papers, 1637-1891, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter Belknap papers, MHS). For Hazard’s two volumes of transcripts, see Peter Force papers and collection, 1492-1977, Series VIII, box VIII, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

4. Ebenezer Hazard to Jeremy Belknap, April 17, 1781, Belknap papers, MHS. In a letter to Belknap, John Eliot, a fellow antiquarian, predicted (wrongly) how impending marriage would affect Hazard, a longtime bachelor: “But mark my words. H. will not search historical records, musty parchments, &c., after marriage as he hath done before. You would not do it if you were not above the advice of your wife, in which you shew your good sense, for I heard her scold about it when I resided at your house, & know she would have persuaded you off the notion of writing history, to say no more. But Hazard is an old bachelor; they are always fond, doating husbands, & it is a wonder if his girl don’t prove a speckled hen that will peck him.”

A number of participants also used the network to request and receive historical patronage. They received crucial assistance in getting access to official sources from politicians and military officials who understood the political importance of creating a coherent national history after the Revolution, including Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Knox, and many others. William Gordon, a British expat minister in Massachusetts, wrote the first general history of the Revolution, relying on the help of a number of politicians and military leaders. In July of 1783, Washington offered Gordon access to “all my Records & Papers” inviting him to stay at Mount Vernon for two weeks to copy what he needed.⁵ The following spring Gordon applied for and received “access ... to the documents and records in the archives of Congress.”⁶ In addition to corresponding with men like Adams, Jefferson, Rush, and Knox, David Ramsay used his time in Congress in New York and his access to Congress’s papers to copy as much as he possibly could for the general history of the Revolution he was writing at the same time. By May 1786, his time in Congress was nearing an end. To get as much copying done as possible, he had “for some months” spent “from five to 8 hours every day at this work.”⁷ Again, without institutional

5. George Washington to William Gordon, July 8, 1783, Series 4, General Correspondence, 1697-1799, George Washington papers, 1592-1943, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. For a more obscure instance of a budding historian prevailing upon Washington, see John O’Connor to George Washington, October 5, 1789, in *Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, ed. Dorothy Twohig, et al. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993-present), 4:138-9.

6. Washington’s offer of access to his official military correspondence was predicated upon Gordon first receiving permission from Congress to access their archives. For Gordon’s petition to Congress for “access, under the necessary restraints, to the documents and records in the archives of Congress,” see “Extracts from the Journal of Congress, May 25,” *The Political Intelligencer and New-Jersey Advertiser*, August 3, 1784. The original copy is in the Papers of the Continental Congress, No. 19, II, folio 427, National Archives, Washington D.C. For the Congress’s approval, see *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 27:427-8. Gordon’s visit to the Congress in August 1785 is noted in *Ibid.*, 29:626. For Gordon’s access to Washington’s personal papers, see William Gordon to George Washington, March 8, 1784; William Gordon to Nathanael Greene, April 5, 1784, in John T. Morse, Jr., “Letters of the Reverend William Gordon, Historian of the American Revolution, 1770-1799,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 63 (1929-30): 502-3..

7. David Ramsay to Benjamin Rush, May 3, 1786, Rush MSS, Vol. 45, Library Company of Philadelphia (hereafter LCP).

repositories, historians looking for official documents and the papers of prominent figures had to turn directly to the governments and individuals who held them for patronage in the form of access. Their correspondence with multiple participants drew them into the network where they played an important role in fostering historical cultural production and the expansion of history culture.

Secondly, participants shared drafts of their work and offered each other feedback and encouragement. Often isolated locally, they used the network to effectively serve the functions of a modern-day writers' support or working group. In the fall of 1786, Ramsay sent a draft of six chapters to Charles Thomson, and asked him to share it with other "Eastern Gentlemen."⁸ I have actually found the only known extant copy of one of these manuscript drafts, previously unidentified and mislabeled at the New-York Historical Society (see fig. 2). Thomson wrote back with a long account of events in Philadelphia in 1776 that Ramsay included in his published version verbatim. While Thomson's is the only extant response, a comparison between one of the circulated drafts and the published volume reveals many significant changes, suggesting that the feedback Ramsay received very much shaped his revisions of the manuscript before publication.⁹ Similarly, Jedidiah Morse, in writing the historical portions of his *American Geography*, was so desirous of feedback that he sent Belknap his "first & only draught."¹⁰ Most writers participating in the network drew on any and all potentially helpful relationships and resources. William

8. David Ramsay to Benjamin Rush, September 26, 1786, Rush MSS, Vol. 45, LCP.

9. [David Ramsay], "History of American Revolution commencing with the settlement of the American Colonies coming down to Novr. 8. 1775. Found among the papers of Govr. Wm Livingston," mss., box 1, folders 1-2, John Jay Papers, 1664-1823, New-York Historical Society (hereafter N-YHS). Thomson appears to have forwarded it to William Livingston, with John Jay, his son-in-law, coming into its possession upon his death in 1790. The manuscript had remained unidentified in the Jay Papers since it was donated by William Jay on October 26, 1847. See *Proceedings of the New York Historical Society* (New York: Press for the Historical Society, 1847), 135.

10. Jedidiah Morse to Jeremy Belknap, January 18, 1788, in *CMHS*, 6th Ser., 4:381-4.

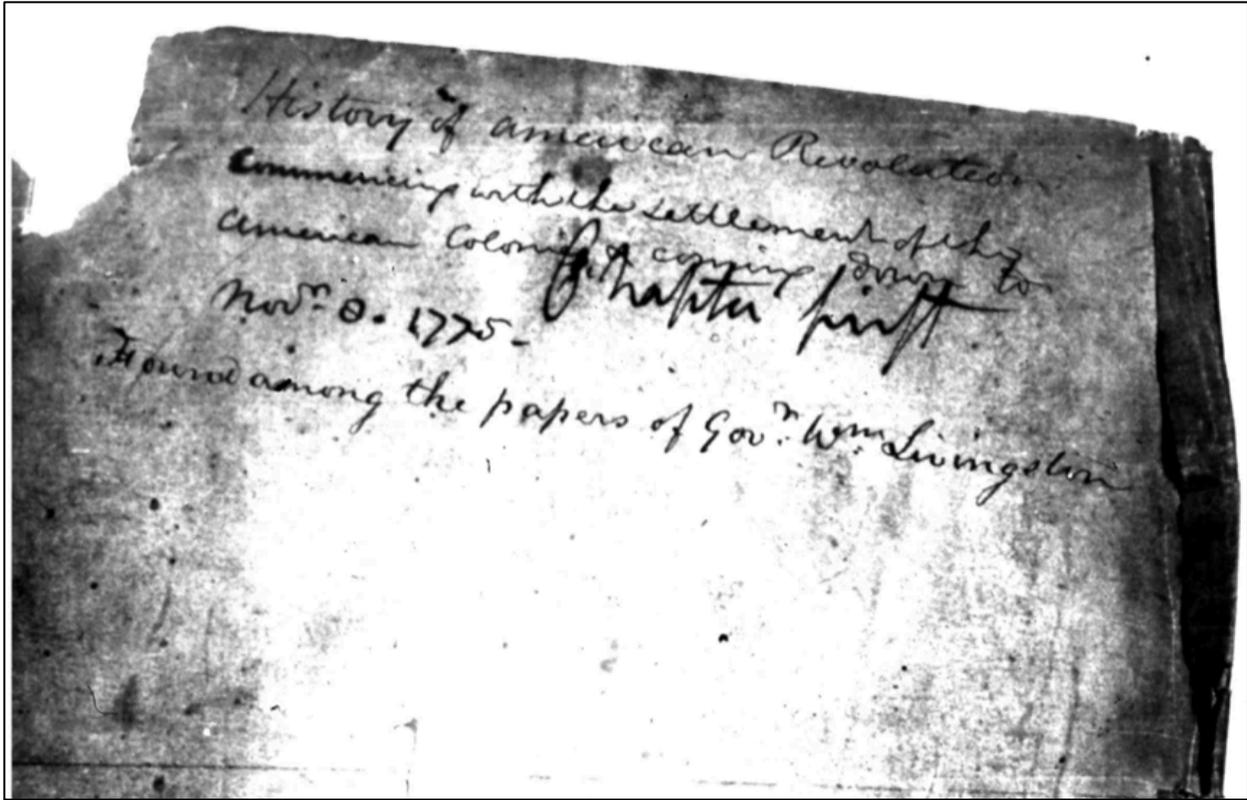


Figure 2. Cover leaf of previously unidentified draft of David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution* (1790). New-York Historical Society.

Gordon, however, did not seek feedback on his history of the Revolution. After its publication, Belknap, Hazard, Ramsay, and others judged the work harshly. Belknap attributed stylistic and factual errors to Gordon's failure to avail himself of the opportunities of getting feedback from his fellow historians. He wrote, "I only wish that Dr. Gordon had let his History be seen by some judicious friends ... but he had too much of the self-sufficient principle in him."¹¹ Unlike Gordon, however, many participants understood the practice of history as a collaborative endeavor and sought to use their network relationships to improve their work. (13:15)

Thirdly, participants shared publishing information and advice with each other and used the network to create professional relationships with the printer/publishers who participated in

11. Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, July 18, 1789, Belknap Papers, MHS.

the network. Meanwhile, printers used their network relationships with writers to secure historical content, particularly for their magazines. When Belknap was preparing to publish the first volume of his *History of New-Hampshire*, he wrote to Hazard to ask about potential printers in Philadelphia, “I like Bailey’s *type* that Evans’s sermon was printed with, but should choose better paper and a larger *page*, such as the *Observations on the Revolution*, printed by Styner and Cist in 1779.”¹² A number of the historians in the network also used each other and keyed-in printers to collect subscriptions in other cities for their works.¹³ Finally, participants in the network used their connections to support the production and publication of a number of important magazines. Publishers and editors of magazines, such as Mathew Carey, Robert Aitken, Noah Webster, and Isaiah Thomas, were constantly in need of original material for their magazines and turned to the contacts they had made as participants in the network. Belknap, Ramsay, and others received constant requests to contribute to these nationalist-minded magazines and, indeed, the relationships formed between network participants helped make original historical content in a variety of forms an important part of early American magazines. More broadly, the network offered authors a means of navigating a new and, as yet, uncertain publishing industry, thereby providing significant support not only in the production of historical-themed works but also in their publication and circulation. The uncovering of this network makes clear that, despite (and in part because of) the lack of institutional support, historical cultural production in this period was a collaborative endeavor that had many hands from all over the new nation involved, drawing on layers of interrelationships to foster its

12. Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, March 20, 1782, in *CMHS*, 5th Ser., 2:122. Belknap is referring to Israel Evans, *A Discourse Delivered Near York in Virginia On the Memorable Occasion of the Surrender of the British Army* (Philadelphia: Francis Bailey, 1782); [Gouverneur Morris], *Observations on the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Styner and Cist, 1779).

13. For an example of Gordon having Robert Aitken collect subscriptions for him in Philadelphia, see *Pennsylvania Journal*, February 1, 1786.

creation, production, and circulation.

Beginning in the 1790s, however, a number of the nation's first historical societies were established including the MHS, NYHS, and AAS, as well as the nation's first historical museums, most famously, the Peale Museum in Philadelphia, all contributing to the institutionalization of history culture in the early republic. All of the lead figures involved in establishing them and many of their local members were participants in this informal historical network and these institutions were very much designed to provide the same types of support that the informal network had in their absence, including collecting sources, preserving them in repositories, making them available to the public, and providing a space for those interested in this work to establish supportive relationships.

Establishing "public repositories for historical materials" was an increasingly urgent matter. John Pintard, founder of the NYHS and network participant, argued they provided "a public benefit by affording a safe deposit for many fugitive tracts which surviving the purpose of a day, are generally afterwards consigned to oblivion tho' ever so important in themselves, as useful to illustrate the manners of the times."¹⁴ Belknap, as head of the MHS, knew he had to be active. "There is nothing like having a *good repository* and keeping a *good look-out*, not waiting at home for things to fall into the lap, but prowling about like a wolf for the prey."¹⁵ Just having a repository, however, did not guarantee the survival of historical documents. Preserving these materials and making them available to as many potential researchers as possible required "multiplying the copies," which was most efficiently done "by printing them in some

14. John Pintard to Thomas Jefferson, August 26, 1790, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 17:352-3n. For a transcript, see *The Papers of the Continental Congress*, National Archives, 4:151.

15. Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, August 21, 1795, in *CMHS*, 5th Ser., 3:356-7.

Voluminous work.”¹⁶ Accordingly, each of the first three historical societies made provisions for the publication of their collections immediately upon their establishment. The establishment of the repositories and publication of important documents fulfilled the first two purposes of the network.

Fulfilling the other two purposes of the informal network, these institutions were national in their scope and sought to elect honorary members from other cities and states, as a way of fostering on an even greater scale the types of profitable relationships the network had produced before their establishment, thereby creating ready-made networks, both local and national, for those engaged in historical work whether that aided research, writing, publication, or circulation. These historical societies, like their museum counterparts, were at least in theory supposed to be open to the public with the explicit goal of helping educate Americans about their newly shared national past, which was the most fundamental purpose fueling historical cultural production in this period. In these ways, the informal network established and developed in the 1780s and 1790s very much shaped the form and purposes of the nation’s first historical societies. In the process, these institutions also carved out a visible and tangible place for history culture within the cultural landscape of the early republic, i.e., part voluntary association, part library, part museum, simultaneously local and national.

This paper’s combination of topics and the connections it argues for between them were the direct result of thinking in terms of “history culture.” I began with the recognition that there was far more historical cultural production in the period than I had been led to suspect. An examination of that production through print culture and history of the book approaches led me to these relationships. Understanding their connections through a networking perspective led me

16. “Introductory Address from the Historical Society. To the Public,” *The American Apollo*, January 6, 1792; Jeremy Belknap to John Adams, July 18, 1789, Adams Papers, MHS.

to the institutional history of the societies founded and supported by network participants. That is just one example drawn from my broader work of how thinking in terms of “history culture” allowed me to see connections between a variety of topics and scholarly interests regarding early America and the early republic and that experience leads me to believe there are many more connections out there waiting to be found.