

*L*earning to  
Read and Write  
in Colonial America



*E. Jennifer Monaghan*

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Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book

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E. JENNIFER MONAGHAN

University of Massachusetts Press  
Amherst and Boston

*in association with*

American Antiquarian Society  
Worcester, Massachusetts

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Printed in the United States of America  
First paperback printing 2007

LC 2004027600  
ISBN 978-1-55849-581-4 (paper)  
ISBN 978-1-55849-486-2 (cloth)

Designed by Jack Harrison  
Set in Adobe Garamond with Bickham Script display by Binghamton Valley Composition  
Printed and bound by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Monaghan, E. Jennifer, 1933–  
Learning to read and write in Colonial America / E. Jennifer Monaghan.  
p. cm. — (Studies in print culture and the history of the book)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55849-486-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Literacy—United States—History—17th century.
2. Literacy—United States—History—18th century.
3. Books and reading—United States—History—17th century.
4. Books and reading—United States—History—18th century. I. Title. II. Series.

LC151.M65 2005

302.2'244'0973—dc22

2004027600

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data are available.

This publication was supported in part by the Waldo Lincoln Publication Fund  
of the American Antiquarian Society.

*For my husband, Charles Monaghan*

Without you, not only would this book never have been completed,  
it would not even have been begun.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For assistance with this book, I am much indebted to the librarians at the libraries and historical societies that I visited for my research. My largest debt is to the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), particularly to John Hench and Nancy Burkett, to Georgia Barnhill, Joanne Chaison, Thomas Knoles, Caroline Sloat, and Marie Lamoureux. (Additional thanks to Therasa Tremblay, Laura Wasowicz, and Su Wolfe.) Every student of early America is deeply indebted to the present and past presidents of the AAS, Ellen Dunlap and Marcus McCorison, for their vision in making the society what it is—a haven for researchers. The depth of the society's holdings is extraordinary, the expertise and helpfulness of its librarians and staff legendary. I am honored to have this book published in association with the American Antiquarian Society.

Fellow researchers at the Goddard Daniels House, which the AAS maintains for visiting scholars (and which my husband, Charles, and I came to look on as our house in the country), were models of unselfish assistance. Very special thanks go to Konstantin Dierks, who unstintingly shared his ongoing research on letter writing in the last half of the eighteenth century.

I thank the librarians at other institutions, naming them in the order my research took me over the years from my home base in Brooklyn, New York. Foremost is the New York Public Library. Other valuable institutions in New York were the Brooklyn College Library of The City University of New York, the Brooklyn Public Library, the New-York Historical Society, the Pierpont Morgan Library, and Columbia University Library. Farther afield, the University of Rochester Library, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the Houghton Library of Harvard University, the Boston Public Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and the Duke's County Historical Society of Martha's Vineyard all provided sources. As I traveled south from New York, my scholarly debts grew, to the librarians at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Library Company of Philadelphia (with particular thanks to James Green), the Library of Congress, the Virginia Historical Society, the South Carolina Historical Society, the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, and the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Georgia. Our recent move to Charlottesville, Virginia, brought me within reach of the Alderman and other fine libraries of the University of Virginia.

For research undertaken abroad, I am grateful to librarians at the Osborne Collection at the Toronto Public Library, the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, the University of Edinburgh Library, the British Museum Library, the Cambridge University Library, the Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and par-

ticularly the librarians at Rhodes House Library, Oxford, which holds the papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

Visiting this many institutions over so many years would not have been possible without travel grants from my own college, Brooklyn College of The City University of New York, and CUNY itself. I benefited from grants from The City University of New York, PSC-CUNY Research Award Program, no. 664048 (1984–1985), no. 666062 (1986–1987), and no. 665071 (1994–1995). Brooklyn College provided invaluable faculty research support over several semesters. Above all, I benefited from the luxury of an entire year free of all college responsibilities when the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities awarded me one of their fellowships for a full academic year. I would like to pay tribute to the contributions of Robert Viscusi and the late President Robert Hess for the creation of this series of fellowships, and to President Christoph Kimmich for his continuing support.

I thank Cathy Davidson for crucially including me in her special issue on reading in the 1988 *American Quarterly*. Several scholars generously gave their time and insights, after reading various chapters: James Axtell, Benjamin Franklin IV, Lucille Schultz, Steven Spackman, Betty Wood, and my Brooklyn College colleague Anna Acosta. Thanks, too, to my friend Sandra Pierson Prior for medieval sources.

At a later stage, I learned much from the insightful comments and encouragement of Patricia Crain. I am especially grateful to Robert Gross, whose detailed review and timely bibliographical suggestions raised new questions, made me rethink the structure and thrust of the book, and even clarified some of my conclusions. A great debt remains to David Hall, who read every word of this book in its first version, and who then read it all again in its near final form. His knowledge, insights, suggestions, support, and kindness have sustained me over the twenty-year lifetime of this project.

David Rawson shared his invaluable expertise on colonial literacy by preparing the data for the graphs in the appendixes. Graphic designer Michaux Hood translated them into their present elegant form. Deborah Stuart Smith was most helpful in spotting errors and infelicities in the manuscript, and in suggesting solutions, on behalf of the University of Massachusetts Press. I thank all the folks at the press wholeheartedly for the care they have taken with this book, particularly Carol Betsch, managing editor. A special thank you to Paul Wright, senior editor, who had faith in this project even in its initial and most unpublishable form.

Several publishers have graciously given me their permission to adapt and reprint material from earlier articles of mine: the American Studies Association, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* (1988); the History of Education Society, "'She loved to read in good Books': Literacy and the Indians of Martha's Vineyard, 1643–1725," *History of Education Quarterly* (1990); the International Reading Association, "Family Literacy in Early 18th-Century Boston: Cotton Mather and His Children," *Reading Research Quarterly* (1991); and "Readers Writing: The Curriculum of the Writing Schools of Eighteenth-Century Boston," *Visible Language* (1987). Additional thanks to ABC-CLIO for permission to use material from my chapter in *Girls and Literacy in America* (2003), edited by Jane Greer, and to Cambridge University Press for two graphs from *A History of the Book in America*, volume one.

I also wish to acknowledge here those who were not involved directly in this particular monograph but whose commitment to the importance of the history of literacy and literacy instruction has sustained me in a different way. As teachers of literacy to students in today's schools, colleges, and universities, and as members of the History of Reading Special Interest Group (SIG), founded in 1975, of the International Reading Association, we have worked together to convince our parent organization and its members that historical research is as meaningful for the present as it is for the past. Thanks are due, in order of their leadership as presidents of the SIG, to Janet Miller, June Gilstad, Miriam Balmuth, Richard Hodges, David Moore, the late Garr Cranney, Luther Clegg, Norman Stahl, Bernardo Gallegos, Peter Fisher, Arlene Barry (who mounted an exhibition of old reading textbooks at the 1999 International Reading Association convention and coauthored its catalogue with me), Richard Robinson, Joseph Zimmer, and Douglas Hartman (who has collaborated with me on several publications on the history of literacy).

Others who have supported this mission are my friends Bridget Cooke and Virginia Cantarella. Those who aided our quest in a different way are Philip Gough, James Hoffman, and the late Ralph Staiger. Yet others set me out on this long journey in the first place. I thank my friends Nina Bentley, Joan Sexton, Ellen Sporn, Wendy Hall Maloney, Madeline Lee, and Enid Pearsons. I am most grateful to my professors at Yeshiva University, Lawrence Kasdon and Susan Sardy, and to Moshe Anisfeld for his work on the acquisition of language, which opened new vistas for me, and for introducing me to Richard Venezky. To Dick, who became my mentor and friend and whose untimely death has left a void in the scholarship on the history of literacy, I remain forever indebted.

My last thanks go, as always, to my family. Our elder daughter, Leila, gave me the benefit of her perspective on the book as a linguistic anthropologist; our son, Anthony, warned me to back up my writing in the nick of time and reorganized my work space; our younger daughter, Claire, provided valuable comments and questions on several chapters. Thanks as well to our son-in-law, Kirk Tolchin, and our daughter-in-law, Dayna, née Shook. Thank you, my dears, for your comments on the work in progress and for your encouragement and patience with a project that took up so much of my time and attention. I have finished this book just as the first of our grandchildren begin their own journeys toward literacy. I hope all our grandchildren, Conor, Jane, Regan, and Liam Monaghan, and Quinn, Jake, and Aidan Monaghan Tolchin, will be the beneficiaries of my new influx of spare time.

My final bouquet of thanks is to my husband, Charles Monaghan, who has collaborated on this in ways that are invisible but crucial. He found sources for me, read and reread early and late drafts, gave me the benefit of his keen editing eye, stage-managed the project at key stages, and greatly enriched my understanding of American history by the capaciousness of his own. (And he even spared me from cooking.) His unflagging support of this effort bears witness to our treasured friendship and our love.

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## Introduction

The passion and heat generated in the United States over the past decades on the issue of reading methodology (all too often oversimplified as a phonics versus whole-language debate) show that we are still looking for the best way to teach children to read and write. At least we all agree on one thing: the importance of literacy acquisition. Virtually all other aspects of education in this letter-filled world hinge on our ability to master this skill, and education is almost universally acknowledged to be the pathway to job satisfaction and personal self-fulfillment. Moreover, illiteracy among disadvantaged groups, as Carl Kaestle warns, can threaten the survival of the American Republic. Just as our founders believed, we need a well-informed and thoughtful citizenry to make democracy work.<sup>1</sup>

Since literacy begins in childhood, children's literacy and literacy instruction are therefore of central concern to many. Certainly, it is of keen importance to parents and teachers; but it is also an object of study for distinct groups of scholars with overlapping interests: researchers into reading and writing, linguists, educational psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, among others. Scientific investigation into reading, in particular, has a long tradition in the United States, dating from the eye-movement measurements of readers conducted in the 1890s and early 1900s.

Although much attention has been paid to the literacy of the present, the same cannot be said for the literacy instruction of the past. Surprisingly little research has been undertaken by educational historians on how children in colonial America were taught to read and write. Lawrence Cremin, author of the three-volume *American Education*, pronounced the research on colonial reading instruction "scandalously thin." Even on Cremin's own broad canvas, a review of such instruction fills only a few pages. Virtually the only extended discussion of the topic is the twenty-five-page account in Nila Banton Smith's *American Reading Instruction*, written as a dissertation and first published in 1934; the colonial portion was not updated in later editions. Significantly, for a work written so long ago, Smith identified many key texts, but it is hardly surprising that she was not interested in areas that have become of importance to us today, such as gender and class, race and ethnicity. Even so, she is more informative than Mitford Mathews, whose 1966 study of teaching reading in America omits colonial literacy instruction entirely. Important studies of colonial writing instruction (penmanship) were undertaken by Ray Nash, but his work is not easily accessible today. The only excep-

tion to this general picture is the recent publication of *Literacy in America* by Edward Gordon and Elaine Gordon, whose use of personal evidence, such as diaries, has brought welcome coloration and context to the study of American literacy. Since, however, their ambitious work covers the story of literacy in America up to the present time, they inevitably cannot do full justice to the colonial period.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of attention to the details of instruction may be due to the wide acceptance of what is known as the Bailyn-Cremin thesis of education: the insistence first by Bernard Bailyn and then by Lawrence Cremin that there are many educating agencies (such as families, communities, and churches) in addition to schools. This position was itself a reaction to the work of earlier educational historians, who had focused on formal schooling to the exclusion of all else. An ironic consequence of this broader definition of education—one that I certainly accept—has been a decrease in attention to formal instruction, and nowhere is this more evident than in the details of literacy instruction.

If educational historians have had their reasons to slight the details of the transmission of literacy, so too has a group of social historians known as “literacy historians,” whose major interest has been in quantifying how many people were literate, not in how they got to be that way. Literacy historians have studied the literacy of national groups as an offshoot of the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s. In those decades, the new social historians boldly asserted the importance of knowing about the lives of ordinary people and used quantitative methods as their tool. Studies of literacy, in which people were categorized as either literate, if they could sign their names, or illiterate, if they could not, became popular. Since about 1980, literacy historians have made great strides in investigating the number of people who were literate according to this criterion and in exploring relationships between literacy and such constructs as race, gender, social class, and locality (urban versus rural). They have shown a particular interest in how literacy rates have increased over the years and in debating the relationship between literacy and human progress.<sup>3</sup>

The net result has been an outpouring of works on the literacy and illiteracy of the past, covering places and times as distant from each other as ancient Egypt, classical Greece and Rome, medieval Europe, Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Russia from the 1860s to the Russian Revolution, and the United States since 1880, among many, many others. Nor is this concern with literacy confined to the past: there are fierce arguments over the role to be played by literacy in the future, over its relationship to technology, indeed, over the future of literacy itself in an electronic age.<sup>4</sup>

In this enthusiasm for counting marks and signatures and for debating the relationship between concepts such as literacy and liberty, the literacy of ordinary people during the colonial period of America has not been ignored. In the study of literacy in colonial America the pioneer is indisputably Kenneth Lockridge, who as early as 1974 examined the literacy of New England, basing his account on signatures and marks affixed to some three thousand New England wills.<sup>5</sup> He has since been followed by many others, who have mined deeds, oaths, petitions, voter