

AMERICAN LITERATURE



American literature



**is the literature written or
produced in the area of the
United States and its
preceding colonies**

LECTURE 1

The roots of American literature



**AL begins
with the *orally transmitted***

➔ **myths**

➔ **legends**

➔ **tales**

➔ **lyrics**

(always songs)

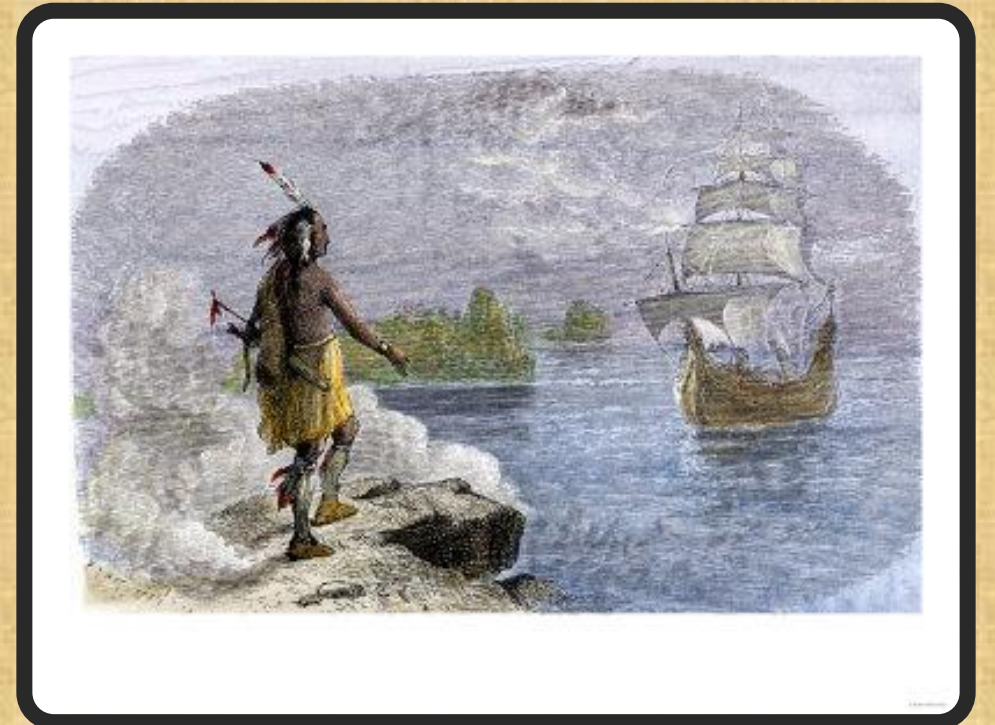
of Indian cultures

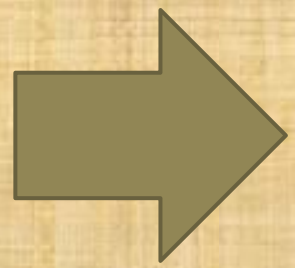




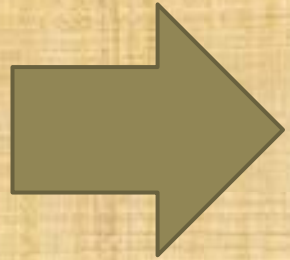
There was *no written literature* among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America

before the first European arrived





**American oral literature
is quite diverse.**



**Though it is possible to make a
few generalizations.**

1. Indian stories grow with reverence for nature as a spiritual as well as physical mother.

1. nature



**2. Nature is alive and endowed
with spiritual forces.**

2. spiritual forces



3. Main characters may be animals, or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual

3. characters - animals, plants



**Examples of almost every oral
genre can be found in American
Indian literature**

- ➔ lyrics,
- ➔ chants,
- ➔ myths,
- ➔ fairy tales,
- ➔ humorous anecdotes,
- ➔ incantations,
- ➔ riddles, proverbs,
- ➔ epics,
- ➔ legendary histories



Do you know all the genres?

Lyrics



are a set of words that make up a song, usually consisting of verses and choruses

A chant



is the rhythmic speaking or singing of words or sounds. Chanting is a commonly used spiritual practice. Like prayer, chant may be a component of either personal or group practice.

A myth



is a traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society

A fairy tale



- a story (as for children) involving fantastic forces and beings (as fairies, wizards, goblins, etc.)
- a story in which improbable events lead to a happy ending

An anecdote



is a short and amusing but serious account, which may depict a real/fake incident or character.

An anecdote is always presented as based in a real incident involving actual persons, whether famous or not, usually in an identifiable place.

An incantation



**is a formula used in ritual
recitation;
a verbal charm or spell.**

A riddle



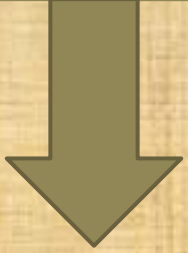
is a question, puzzle, or verse so phrased that ingenuity is required for elucidation of the answer or meaning

A proverb



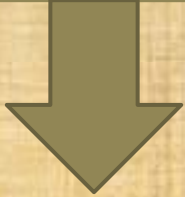
is a short popular saying of unknown and ancient origin, that expresses effectively some commonplace truth or useful thought

An epic



is a long narrative poem usually concerning a central character of heroic stature, or incidents of national or tribal importance

A legendary history



is a narrative of human actions that are perceived both by teller and listeners to take place within human history and to possess certain qualities that give the tale the likeness to reality/truth

**Accounts of migrations and
ancestors abound,
as do vision or healing songs and
tricksters' tales.**

**Certain
creation stories
are particularly
popular**



The songs or poetry, like the narratives, range from the sacred to the light and humorous

**Generally the songs are
repetitive**

**Short poem-songs given in dreams
sometimes have the clear imagery
and subtle mood associated with
Japanese haiku.**

A loon I thought it was

But it was

My love's

splashing oar

(A Chippewa song)

➔ **Vision songs, often very short, are another distinctive form.**

➔ **They may be healing, hunting, or love songs.**

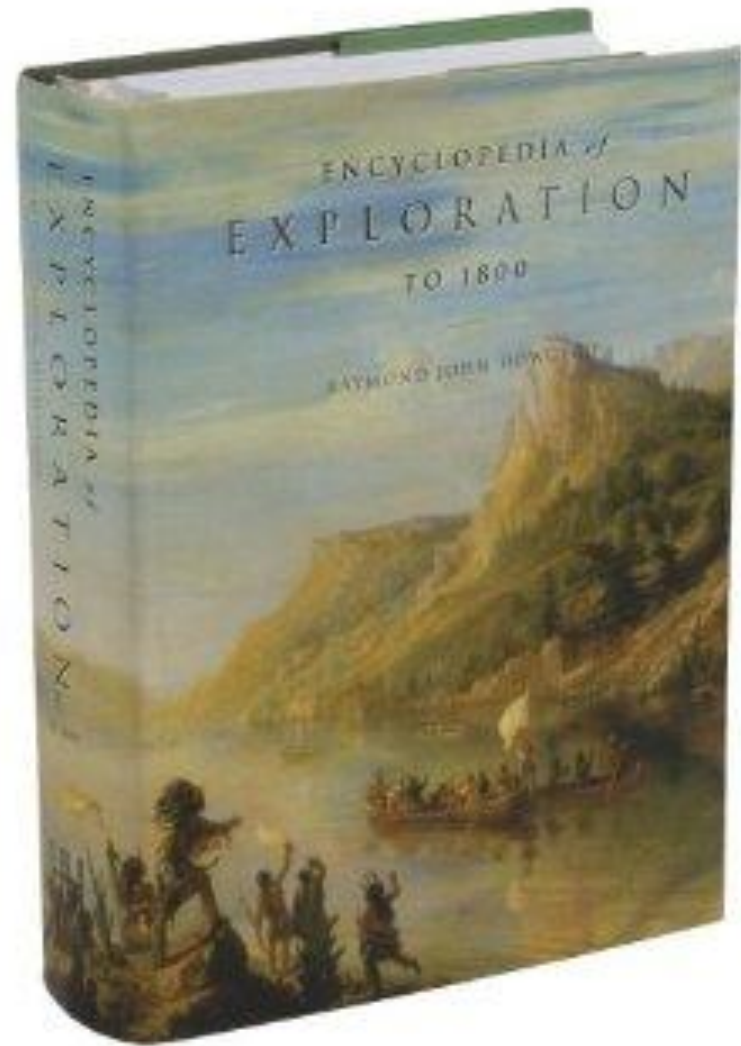
➔ **Often they are personal**

I
the song
I walk here.

(A Modoc song)

Indian oral tradition and its relation to American literature is one of the richest and least explored topics in American studies

2. The literature of exploration



The first European record of exploration in America is in a Scandinavian lg.



The *Old Vinland Saga* recounts how the adventurous Leif Ericson and a band of wandering Norsemen settled briefly somewhere on the northeast coast of America (probably Nova Scotia, in Canada) in the first decade of the 11th century, !!!!!!! almost 400 years before the next recorded European discovery of the New World

Leif Erikson
(or Leif Ericson)
/'leɪf/ or /'liːf/

c. 970 - c. 1020



Leif Erikson

was an Icelandic explorer
regarded as
the first
European to land in
North America (excluding Greenland),
nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus



The first known contact between the Americans and the rest of the world began with the famous voyage of Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, funded by the Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella

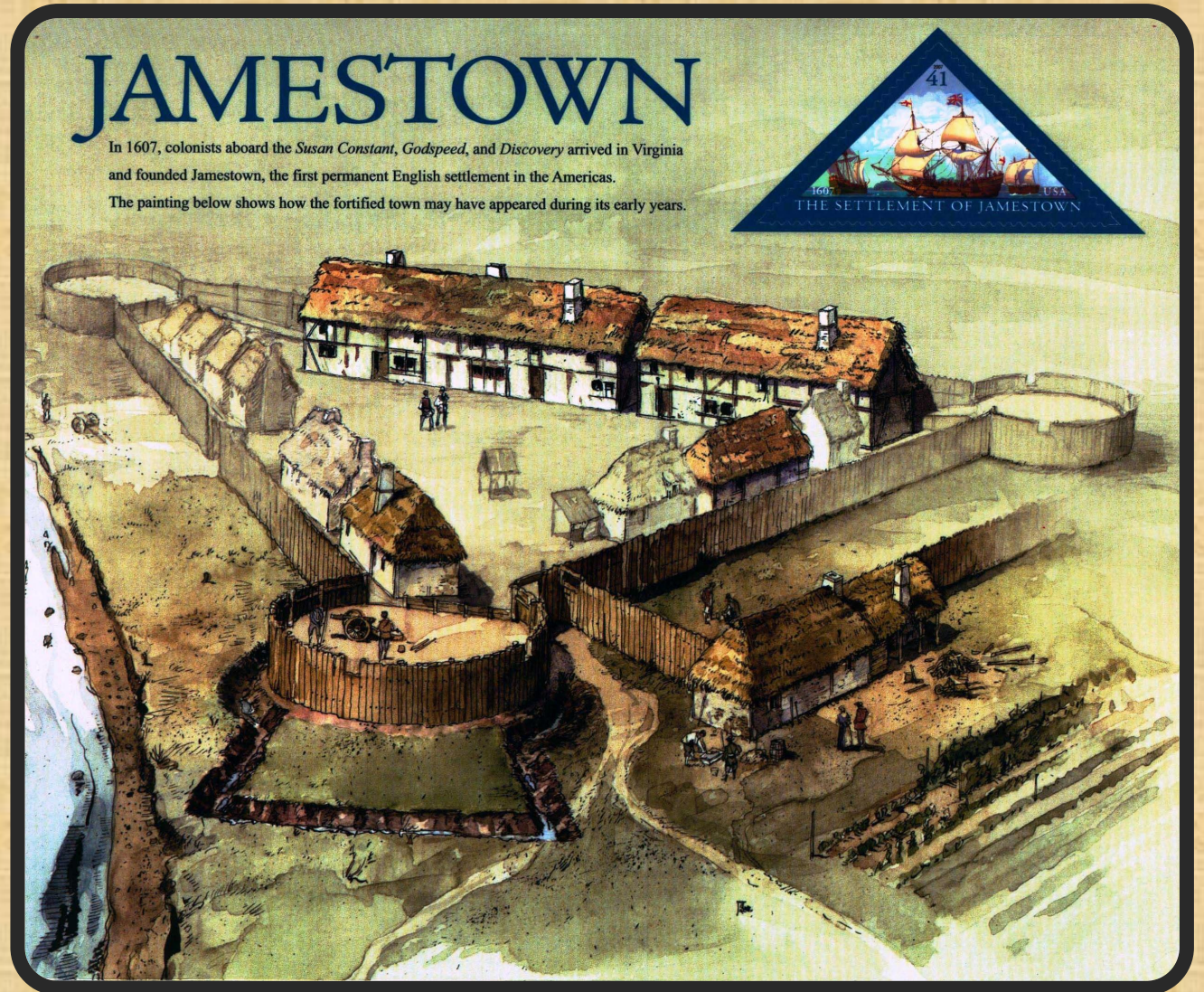


Initial English attempts at colonization were disasters.

The first colony was set up in 1585 at Roanoke /'rou.ənouk/, off the coast of North Carolina; all its colonists disappeared.



The second colony was more permanent: Jamestown, established in 1607. It endured starvation, brutality, and misrule.

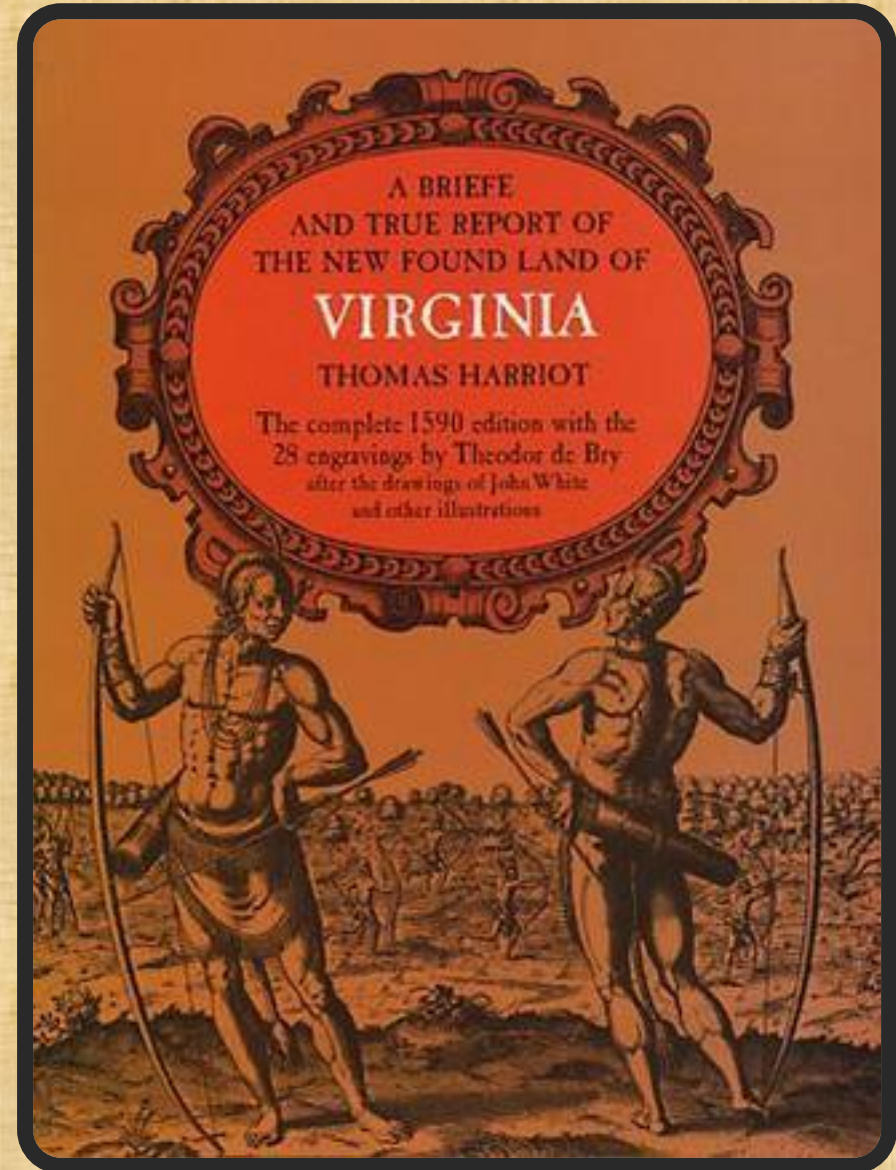


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However, the literature of the period paints America in glowing colors as the land of riches and opportunity.

Accounts of the colonizations became
world-renowned

1) The exploration of *Roanoke* was carefully recorded by *Thomas Hariot* in *A Brief and True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia* (1588)



2) The Jamestown colony's main record, the writing of Captain John Smith, one of its leaders, is the exact opposite of Hariot's accurate, scientific account.



Smith was an incurable romantic, and he seems to have embroidered his adventures.

To him we owe the famous story of the Indian maiden, Pocahontas.



The story recounts how Pocahontas, favourite daughter of Chief Powhatan, saved Captain Smith's life when the English persuaded Powhatan to give Pocahontas to them as a hostage, her gentleness, intelligence, and beauty impressed the English, and , in 1614, she married John Rolfe, an English gentleman. The marriage initiated an eight-year peace between the colonists and the Indians.

In the 17th century, pirates, adventurers, and explorers opened the way to a second wave of permanent colonists, bringing their wives, children, farm implements, and craftsmen's tools.



The early literature of exploration, made up of



diaries;



letters;



travel journals;



ships' logs;



reports to the explorers' financial backers

(European rulers or, in mercantile England and

Holland, joint stock companies)



gradually was supplanted by records of the
settled colonies

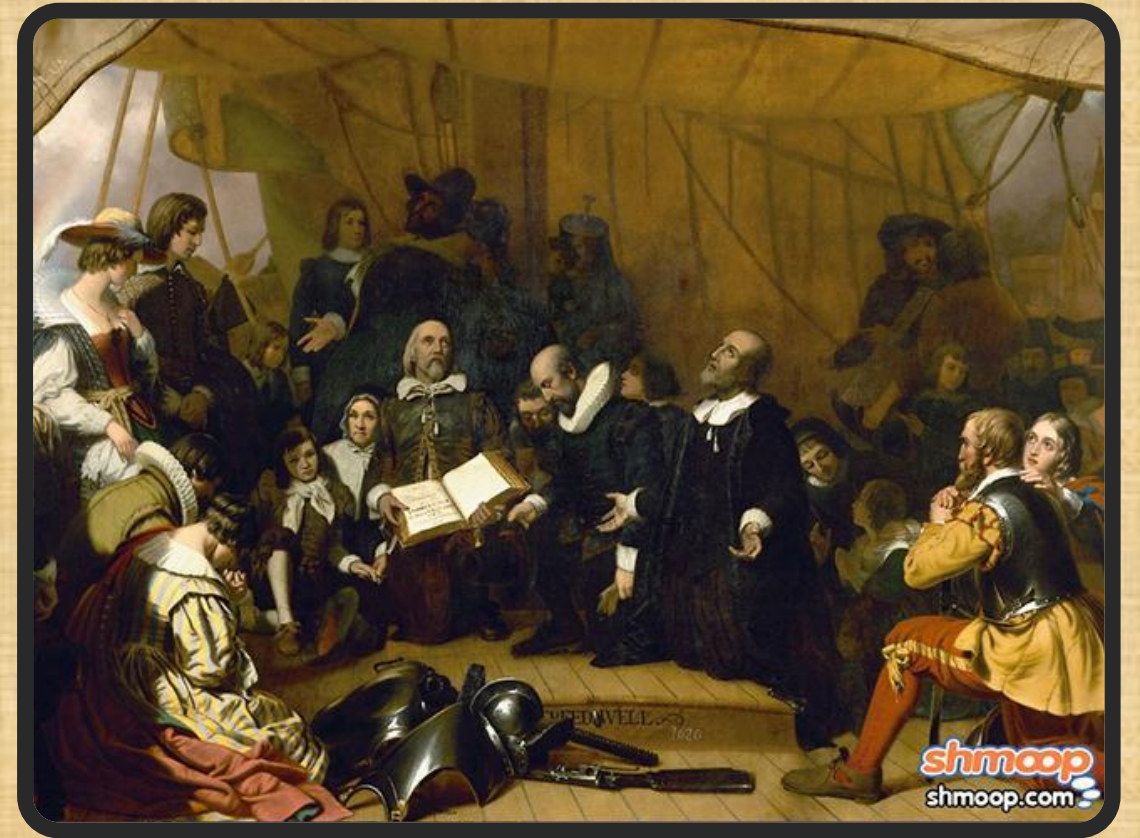
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Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best-known and most-anthologized colonial literature is English

3. The Colonial Period in New England



No other colonists in the history of the world were as intellectual as the Puritans





Who were the Puritans?

Between 1630 and 1690, there were as many university graduates in the northeastern section of the United States, known as New England, as in the mother country

The self-made and often self-educated Puritans wanted education to understand and execute God's will as they established their colonies throughout New England



The Puritan definition of good writing was that which brought home a full awareness of the importance of worshipping God and of the spiritual dangers that the soul faced on Earth

Puritan style

varied enormously -

from *complex metaphysical poetry*

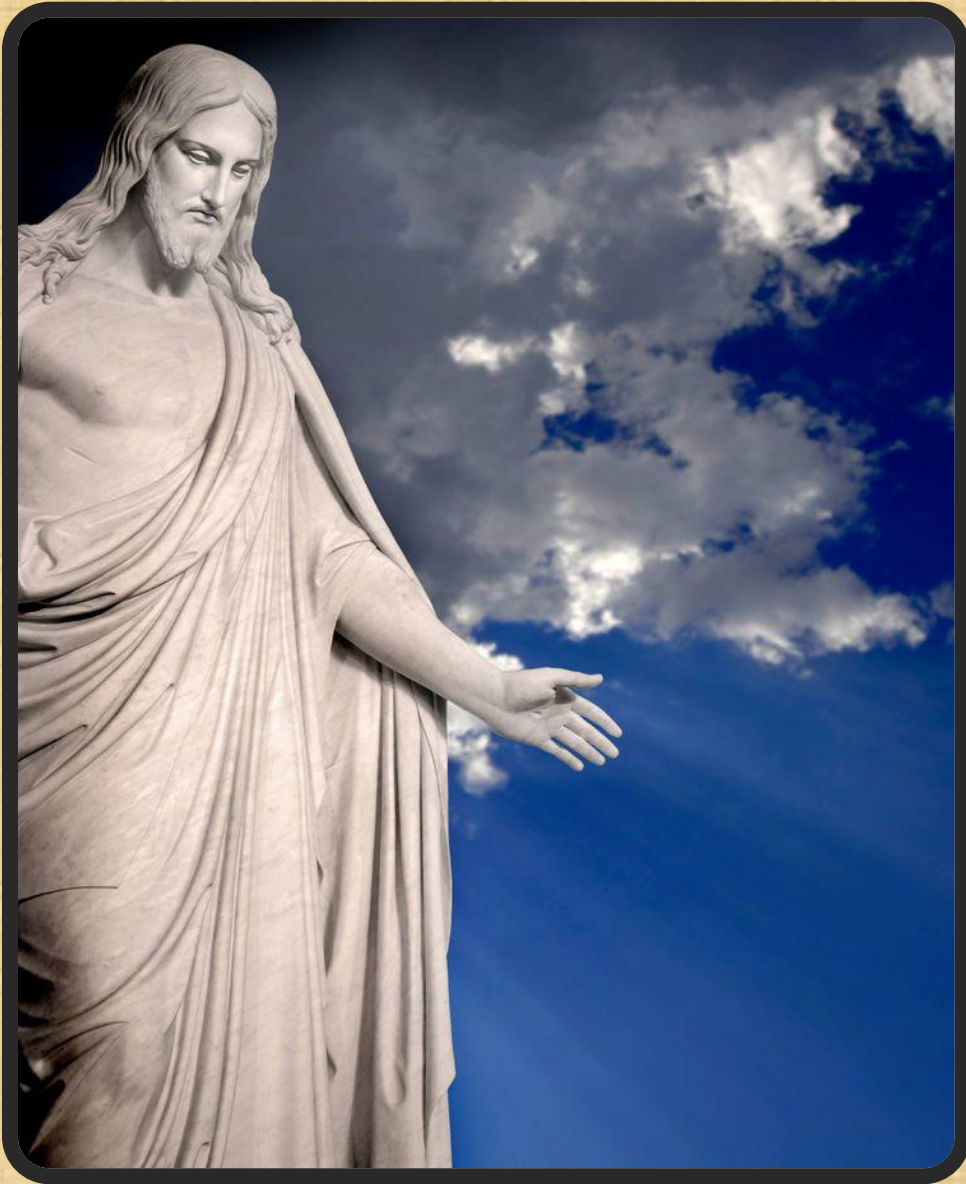


to *homely journals* and *pedantic religious history*

The genre, certain themes remained constant



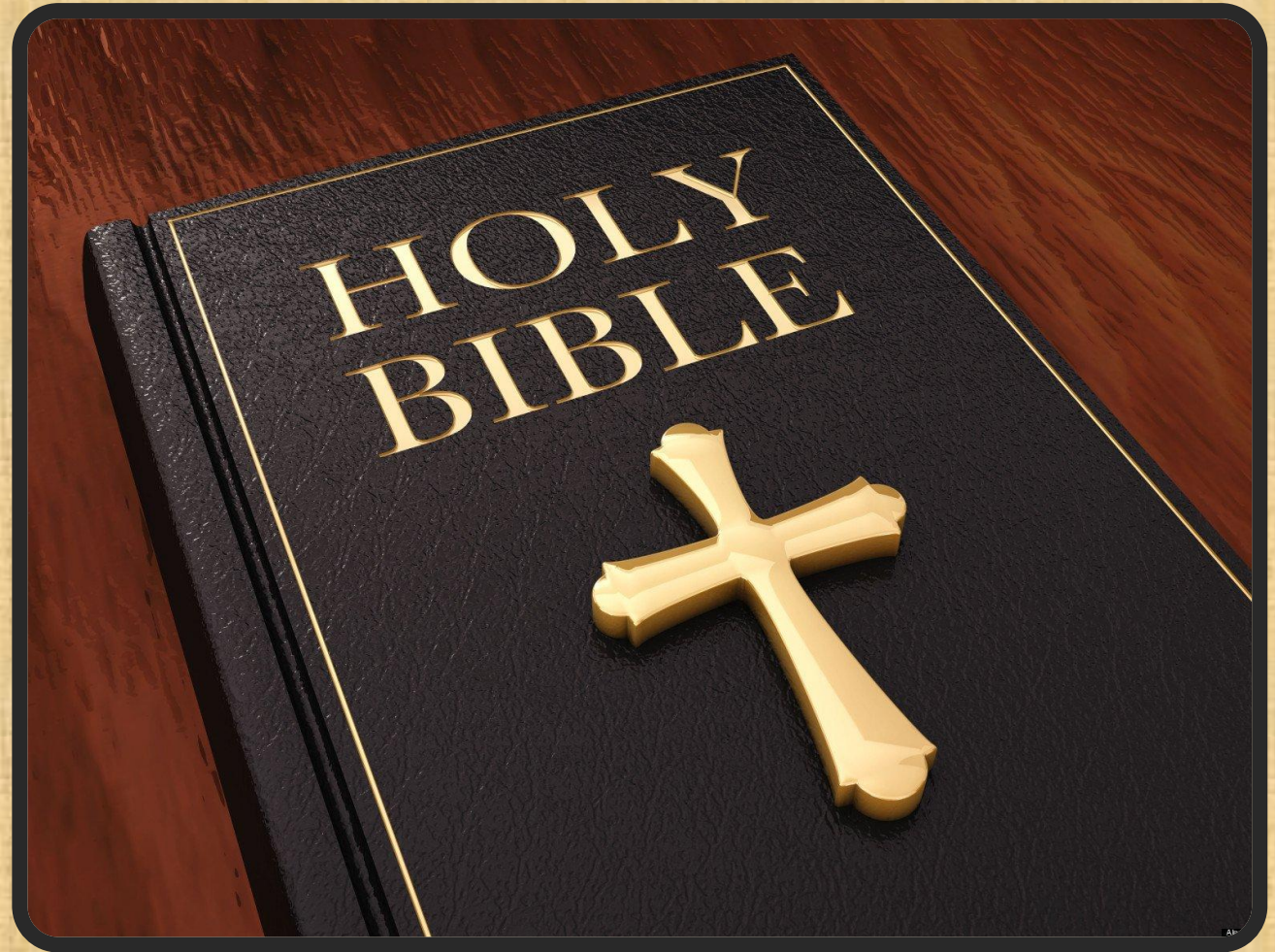
- ➔ life was seen as a test
- ➔ failure led to eternal hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss
- ➔ this world was an arena of constant battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan



Many Puritans excitedly awaited the "millennium," when Jesus would return to Earth, end human misery

The Puritans interpreted all things and events as symbols with deeper spiritual meanings

In recording ordinary events to reveal their spiritual meaning, Puritan authors commonly cited the Bible, chapter and verse.



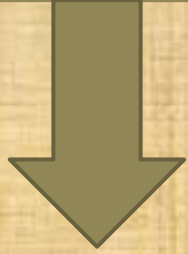
Early literature written by Puritans in America often appeared *as first person narratives* in the form of *journals and diaries*

Early American colonists wrote their accounts of immigration, settling in America, and day-to-day life in journals to pass their stories down.

Three important Puritan genres included:

- ➔ Sermons
- ➔ Historical narrative
- ➔ Poetry

A sermon



is an oration by a member of the clergy.

Puritans lived a simple life based on the concepts of humility and simplicity. This influence comes from their religious beliefs and the Bible.

Wearing elaborate clothing or having conceited thoughts offended Puritans.







Puritan writing mimics these cultural values in its plain writing style.

Puritans

- ➔ wrote directly to the point
- ➔ avoided much of the elaborate writing style that became popular in Europe.

Simple sentences with common language allowed Puritans to communicate information without feeling like they were drawing attention to themselves.

4. Democratic Origins and Revolutionary Writers



The hard-fought **American Revolution** against **Britain (1775-1783)** was the first modern war of liberation against a colonial power



**What do you know about the
American revolution?**



The American Revolution was a political upheaval that took place between 1765 and 1783 during which rebel colonists in the Thirteen American Colonies rejected the British monarchy and aristocracy, overthrew the authority of Great Britain, and founded the United States of America

The triumph of American independence seemed to many a divine sign that America and her people were destined for greatness

Military victory fanned nationalistic hopes
for a great new literature



Yet with the exception of outstanding
political writing, few works of note
appeared during or soon after the
Revolution

➔ American books were harshly reviewed in England

➔ Americans were painfully aware of their dependence on English literary models

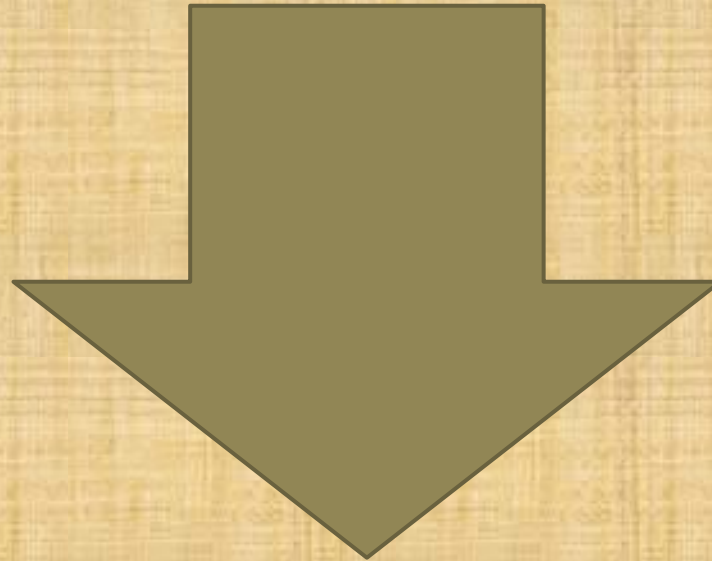
➔ The search for a native literature became a national obsession.

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Cultural revolutions (unlike military revolutions) cannot be successfully imposed but must grow from the soil of shared experience.

It would take **50 years** of accumulated history for America to earn its cultural independence and to produce the first great generation of American writers.

The problems of the time were the following



Early American writers, now separated from England, had

NO

modern publishers
audience
adequate legal protection

1

Until 1825, most American authors

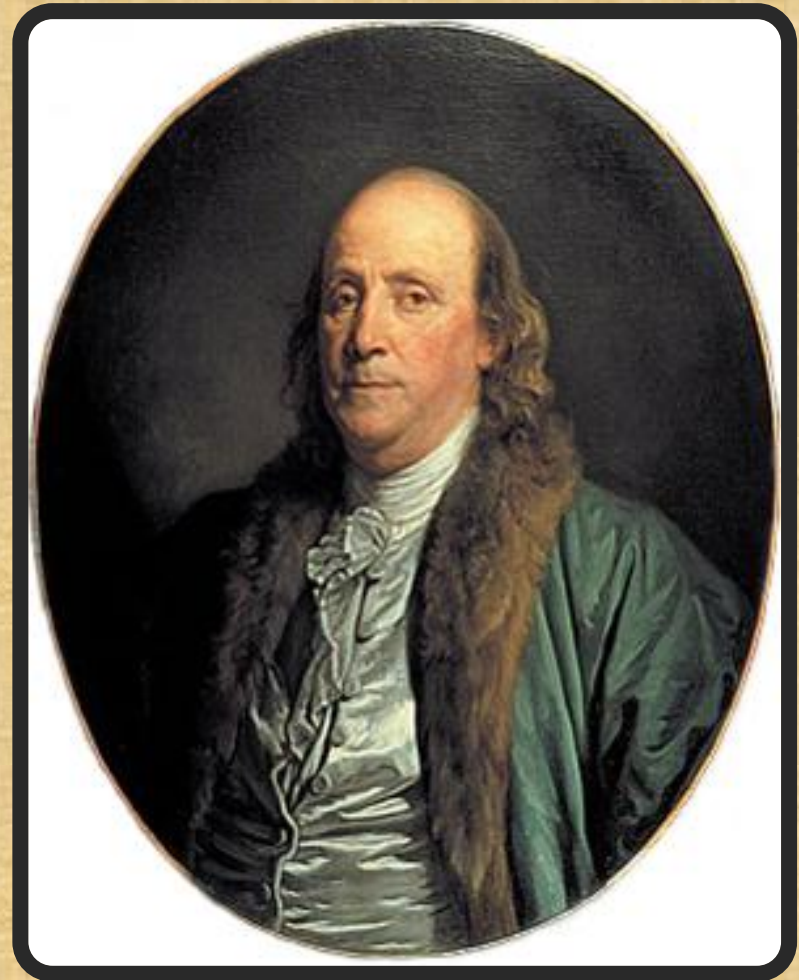
paid printers

to publish their work

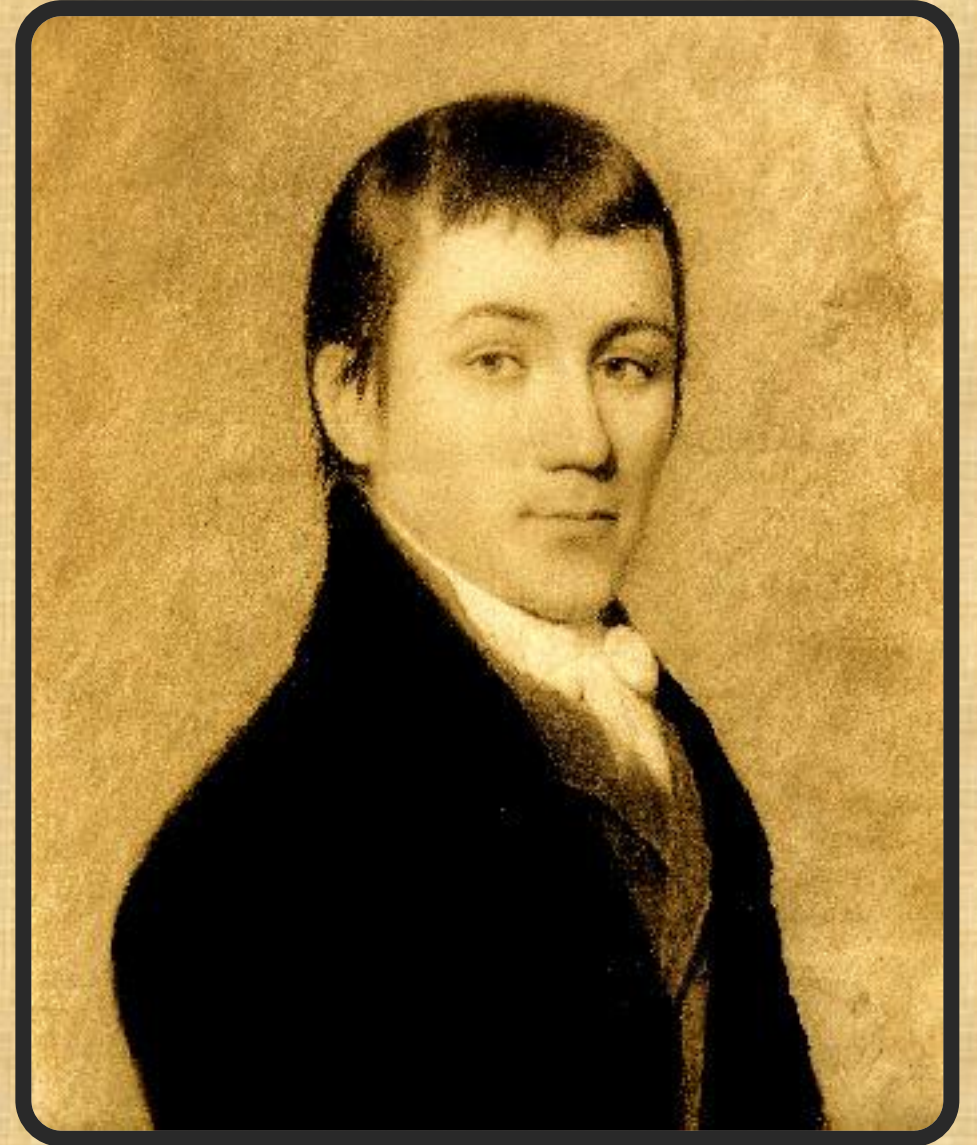
Obviously only the leisured and independently wealthy, like Washington Irving and the New York Knickerbocker group, or the group of Connecticut poets known as the Hartford Wits, could afford to indulge their interest in writing.



*The exception,
Benjamin Franklin,
though from a poor family,
was a printer by trade and
could publish his own work.*



Charles Brockden Brown was more typical. The author of several interesting Gothic romances, Brown was the first American author to attempt to live from his writing. But his short life ended in poverty.



2

The lack of an audience

The small cultivated audience in America wanted well-known European authors, partly out of the exaggerated respect with which former colonies regarded their previous rulers

This preference for English works was not entirely unreasonable, considering the inferiority of American output,



but it worsened the situation by depriving American authors of an audience.

Only journalism offered financial remuneration,

but the mass audience wanted



light,



undemanding verse



and short topical essays

- not long or experimental work.

3

The absence of adequate copyright laws

American printers pirating English best-sellers understandably were unwilling to pay an American author for unknown material.

The unauthorized reprinting of foreign books was originally seen as a service to the colonies as well as a source of profit for printers like Franklin, who reprinted works of the classics and great European books to educate the American public.

Ironically, the copyright law of 1790, which allowed pirating, was nationalistic in intent.

Bad as the law was, none of the early publishers were willing to have it changed because it proved profitable for them.

Piracy starved the first generation of revolutionary American writers



The first great writers began to make their
appearance
around

1825