

Letter Writing, Stationery Supplies, and Consumer Modernity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

In December 1775, Israel Angell wrote an earnest letter from amid the revolutionary siege of Boston to his brother back home. “I am afraid You Can Never Read the above lines,” Angell scribbled in closing, “as They was wrote in a few minutes And with a bad Pen and poor Ink” (Angell xi). Acknowledging that his handwriting might not be legible enough to be read, Angell seemingly suggested that he wrote as much for his own sake as for his brother’s, for catharsis as much as communication. He also rued the inferiority of his pen and ink, implying that he was aware of a spectrum of greater and lesser quality. Although aware, however, he did not fret over the matter, because by 1775 the use of pen and ink had become commonplace even for someone like Angell, a middling farmer and cooper from the hamlet of Johnston, Rhode Island, a few miles west of Providence. What had become commonplace could be taken for granted, no matter whether pen and ink were, in the moment, good or bad.

It had not been commonplace for very long. Born in 1740, Angell would have witnessed a transformation in consumer culture over the first 35 years of his lifetime, but his parents and grandparents would likely have noticed it more palpably, as a dramatic change from the life of their youth. Angell himself had never known anything different, since he fit squarely into the generation of American colonists that came of age between the 1740s and 1770s while experiencing a “consumer revolution”—a broad expansion in the availability of consumer goods of all sorts.¹ If one looks at early American newspaper advertisements for stationery supplies like pen and ink, the notion that there was a “consumer revolution” in this era seems amply confirmed. In the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, for instance, nearly 1,100 advertisements peddled stationery supplies in Philadelphia between 1729 and 1796. Breaking this figure down more finely, there were 33 such ads in the 1730s,

114 in the 1740s, 348 in the 1750s, and 370 in the 1760s.² An upward trend, a significant transformation, is unmistakable. By the time Angell wrote his letter in 1775—on the cusp of political revolution and war—he and other middle-class people could take the ready availability of stationery supplies largely for granted in his home colony of Rhode Island, just as in Pennsylvania.³

To write letters in the eighteenth century nevertheless involved a complex array of one-time investments in writing equipment, as well as regular purchases of certain stationery supplies. Isaac Angell could easily write on an ordinary household table rather than spending quite a bit of money on a specialized piece of furniture—a desk—new to the eighteenth century.⁴ But he would have needed access to (if not to own) paper, quills, ink, sealing wax or wafers, inkpots, and penknives. An inkpot and a penknife were one-time purchases, whereas paper, quills, ink, and sealing wax or wafers would have involved more regular purchasing. The advertising trends in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* indicate, at the very least, that more and more Philadelphia-area retailers sought to meet perceived public demand for all these various stationery supplies.⁵

From the evidence of newspaper advertisements, one could argue, as the historian T. H. Breen has done quite deftly, that colonial American consumers were increasingly attracted to the status, refinement, cosmopolitanism, and modernity they associated with material goods imported from England.⁶ Indeed, it is an analytical truism that material objects, as well as the representation of material objects, contain and convey symbolic meanings.⁷ Among those symbolic meanings are social and geographical imaginaries—images of inclusion and exclusion, affiliation and antagonism, participation and suppression. In buying stationery supplies and other consumer goods, middling as well as affluent people in the American colonies were happily participating in a British empire reaching its zenith in the years before 1775, years entirely innocent, of course, of the calamity to come in the American War of Independence.

However, the litany of consumption trumpeted in early American newspapers like the *Pennsylvania Gazette* can, if contextualized, reveal more than imperatives of refinement and cosmopolitanism in the eighteenth-century anglophone Atlantic world. If we compare newspapers to commercial dictionaries, another genre new to the eighteenth century and likewise inspired by the marvelous growth and expansion of the British imperial

economy, then we can juxtapose the representation of production against the representation of consumption not only in the Atlantic world but in a global world.⁸ If we compare newspapers to pedagogical literature such as penmanship manuals and business manuals that flourished in the eighteenth century, then we can juxtapose the moment of purchase of consumer goods against their ongoing use as household objects.⁹ These comparisons — the representation of stationery supplies from the multiple perspectives of consumption, production, and use — yield cultural notions of modernity beyond consumer refinement and cosmopolitanism. The eighteenth-century anglophone Atlantic world also featured an imperial modernity of extraction and production, as well as a bourgeois modernity of practical utility and technical mastery. Above all, the representation of stationery supplies indicates an extraordinary accumulation of social power for the middle class in the eighteenth century — yet power unintended and unrecognized, and far beyond mere acquisition of status.

Commercial dictionaries made their appearance in British print culture in the 1750s, although they had antecedents in two other print genres: encyclopedias and city directories. In 1704, John Harris published *Lexicon Technicum: Or, An Universal English Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* in the kind of alphabetical format and with the kind of intellectual agenda that would later be labeled an encyclopedia.¹⁰ In 1728, Ephraim Chambers published a two-volume version of the same concept, *Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*.¹¹ Both texts were experiments in the presentation of all that constituted cosmopolitan knowledge of the arts and sciences from the vantage of the British intellectual community in the early eighteenth century. In the case of the *Cyclopaedia*, for instance, such knowledge included everything one might want to know about cinnabar, an ingredient of sealing wax, or copperas, an ingredient of ink. Both texts crossed the Atlantic and found their way into the book collections of a tiny proportion of colonial Americans as well.¹²

City directories, on the other hand, did not cross the Atlantic — as a book object or a literary form — until after the American War of Independence, half a century after they had emerged in London.¹³ By the 1730s, there were two competing city directories peddled in London.¹⁴ The first listed “Directors of Companies[,] Persons in Publick Business, Merchants, and other Eminent Traders” (Kent, title page).¹⁵ The second, more com-

prehensive, listed not only merchants and traders but also street names, public buildings, routes of transport for vehicles such as hackney coaches, and nodes of communications such as post offices.¹⁶ Rather than the cosmopolitan arts and sciences presented in the encyclopedias, the city directories enumerated metropolitan people and places, in their own way beneficial to the growth of the British economy and the expansion of the British empire.

The urge to systematization reflected in both encyclopedias and city directories would converge in another new print genre of the eighteenth century: the commercial dictionary.¹⁷ In the 1750s, three such competing commercial dictionaries were available in London, and like their literary antecedents, they, too, sought to contain within their bounds what was becoming the largest city in Europe, the fastest growing national economy, and the most aggressively expanding empire. They, too, depicted the components of modern stationery supplies as well as the components of modern transport and communications. The first of these commercial dictionaries was translated from the French and upgraded as well by Malachy Postlethwayt, as a bid to compete with and surpass Britain's great European rival.¹⁸ *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* aimed to do for trade and commerce in 1751 what the *Cyclopaedia* had done for the arts and sciences in 1728, to present a seemingly complete field of knowledge for the reader.

Five years later, an opportunistic Richard Rolt published what he billed as a purely and proudly British commercial dictionary, although he nevertheless borrowed heavily from the English edition of the French prototype.¹⁹ Amid the onset of yet another round of warfare between Britain and France, Rolt idealistically envisioned the expansion of "inoffensive" commerce and manufacturing as auguring a grand transformation of the world from general war to general peace.²⁰ More concretely, he proclaimed in his preface the ambition to describe every "commodity of nature," every "manufacture of art," every "place of trade," and every "means of trade" (Rolt, preface). Rolt's commercial dictionary aimed to embrace both microeconomics and macroeconomics — a complete field of knowledge indeed.

Between Postlethwayt and Rolt, an anonymous British author published a lower-end commercial dictionary, *The General Shop Book*, marketed explicitly at middling shopkeepers in "Town or Country," rather than at afflu-

ent urban merchants (*General Book Shop*, title page). This, too, was a hefty tome, commensurate to the monumental task of encompassing all the imported commodities and exported manufactures of every town and county in Britain, of every British colony elsewhere in the world, and of every country in the world trading with Britain. By also aiming to include every skilled occupation turning commodities into British manufactures, this book was meant to surpass Rolt's putative completeness.²¹ Like the other two commercial dictionaries, *The General Shop Book* incorporated the cosmopolitan focus of the encyclopedia and the metropolitan focus of the city directory, but it, too, concentrated above all on an imperial as well as a global scope of economic production.

Indeed, the empire was the way to bring the commodities of the world to Britain and, in turn, to bring the manufactures of Britain to the world. All of these commercial directories placed London at the center of the nation, the empire, and the world, as well as at the vanguard of modernity. One example of this pattern and process was evident in the representation of the stationery supplies that enabled an ordinary middling person like Israel Angell, perched at an edge of the British empire, to write letters. Paper, quill, penknife, inkpot, ink, pounce, sealing wax, wafer — most (not all) of these items were described in detail in the British commercial dictionaries of the 1750s. While the colonial newspapers represented the consumer culture of letter writing, the commercial dictionaries represented the material culture: Where did quills come from? How was sealing wax made? What of these objects were natural resources? What of these objects were manufactured inputs? Who did the work of extraction? Who did the toil of manufacturing? If colonial newspapers represented the vanguard of consumer modernity, commercial dictionaries represented another kind of modernity — an imperial one premised less on the refinement of either metropolitan or colonial consumers, and more on the magnificent productive energy of the British nation and the equally magnificent extractive reach of the British empire.

One new index of this imperial modernity was the manufacturing of paper. "Before the [Glorious] Revolution, there was hardly any other paper made in England than brown," asserted Postlethwayt in 1751. Here in a quick stroke was a sense of time as well as of place — a sense of recent innovation as well as of national pride. By the time Postlethwayt was writing, six decades after the Glorious Revolution, British paper manufacturers were

making “above seven eighths of what is consumed in Great-Britain.”²² So where did paper come from? It came from Britain, manufactured there rather than being imported, as formerly, from France and Holland. Some of that British paper was, in turn, exported to the American colonies, although the 1750s would see five new paper mills established in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The 1770s, meanwhile, would see 25 new mills established throughout the American colonies, including mills established for the first time in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Maryland, and North Carolina.²³

Just as the commercial dictionaries were trumpeting productive imperial modernity, the colonies were making their own lagging transition to the same productive modernity. Such paper mills were advertised in colonial American newspapers, but there they were presented simply as an immediate feature of the economic landscape, rather than more self-consciously as a sign of modernity. In employment ads for the artisans who operated the mills, in runaway ads for the apprentices who staffed the mills, and in collection notices for the poor people who provided the linen rags, the paper mills were assigned normalized currency, not any historicized modernity.²⁴ In contrast to the editors of newspapers, the editors of commercial dictionaries imagined more broadly, more comparatively, and more historically. They tended to gesture to the past, as a way to trumpet the present, to highlight its everywhere surging productivity. Their description of paper manufacturing was unconnected to any mention of print culture, itself another index of modernity in the eighteenth century. Whether used for packing goods, for writing documents, or for printing texts, paper, in its proliferating manufacture and use, stood as its own measure of modernity.

Given this association with modernity, paper manufacturers could be identified by editors of commercial dictionaries as constituting a distinct occupation, but many other occupations did not fit into the representation of economic production. “Brought to London from Germany and Holland [and] from Scotland and Wales,” quills were, according to Richard Rolt, “no inconsiderable article of trade; being sold to the stationers by the thousand, and retailed by them by the hundred.”²⁵ The editors of commercial dictionaries may have imagined more broadly, but they also observed quite selectively. The middling person who bought quills wholesale and sold them retail—a stationer—possessed a recognized, named occu-

pation, an economic niche carrying social respectability in the vast engine of empire. The unskilled, poorer person who plucked the quills from the goose and sold them to the stationer did not, however. Beyond the work of collecting, storing, and transporting quills, that person may even also have cleaned and “dutched” the quills, passing them through hot ashes to remove the animal membrane and fat, making for a harder and sharper quill. Neither the commercial dictionaries nor the city directories recognized this as an economic function, and yet these people certainly helped a quill reach the hands of Israel Angell hunched over the letter he composed in 1775.²⁶ These unskilled workers were there in reality, but not in representation. The editors of commercial dictionaries, then, were more interested in representing the modern features of the economy, rather than in detailing every discrete element of economic production. Trumping comprehensiveness was modernity — although a productive modernity, rather than the consumer one depicted in colonial newspapers.

Not only unskilled occupations but also many skilled ones were missing from the commercial dictionaries of the 1750s. Penknives and inkpots had been widely manufactured in England since the sixteenth century.²⁷ Penknives were commonly made by cutlers, but, judging from the city directories as well as the commercial dictionaries, no cutler apparently specialized in the making of penknives alone, so that there was no such occupation as penknife maker *per se*. Inkpots were commonly made from a variety of materials by a variety of artisans: brass makers, glass makers, pewterers, and silversmiths. Again, none specialized in the making of inkpots, and hence the particular manufacture of both penknives and inkpots was left out of the commercial dictionaries, silently subsumed under other occupations. Whenever the editors of commercial dictionaries thought historically, they tended to divide British, European, and human history into two time periods: the ancients and the moderns. The transition from papyrus to paper and from reed to quill seemed worthy of mention since it happened so long ago, in antiquity, but the technological development of penknives and inkpots seemed to have happened both too recently and not recently enough, in the sixteenth century, after antiquity yet before modernity.²⁸ These manufacturing processes and these consumer goods were certainly there in the real economy, but, again, not in the representation of economic production by the commercial dictionaries. They were not indices of modernity.

If skilled and unskilled labor inside Britain was left somewhat obscure by editors of commercial dictionaries, the representation of labor outside Britain was even more obscure, treated as entirely secondary to the extractive reach of the British empire. Ink, pounce, and sealing wax were all relatively complicated stationery items at the very least because their raw materials had to travel greater distances to reach Britain for manufacture. Ink combined oak galls from Syria, gum arabic from Sudan, and alum and copperas from England. Pounce was derived from gum sandarac, from Morocco.²⁹ Sealing wax blended lac from India and cinnabar from Spain.³⁰ All this comprised British imperial reach beyond a European or an Atlantic world—an imperial reach into a global world.³¹ “The English and Dutch import annually from Aleppo 10,000 quintals of galls,” claimed Richard Rolt in 1756, parroting Ephraim Chambers from 1728.³² Galls were themselves brought to the city of Aleppo in Syria from rural areas in the Diyarbakir and Mosul regions (territory contested by Kurds in present-day Turkey and occupied Iraq).³³

While the editors of commercial dictionaries may have been fascinated with the disparate geographical origins of these raw materials—measures of the extractive reach of the British empire—when it came to manufacturing, they were mainly concerned with what happened inside rather than outside Britain. While the galls and gum arabic were imported, the ink itself was made in Britain with the infusion of copperas and alum, and these British ingredients were granted the longer descriptive entries in the commercial dictionaries. Ephraim Chambers in 1728, Malachy Postlethwayt in 1751, and Richard Rolt in 1756 all explained at length that certain gold-colored stones were found along the English seashore in Essex and Hampshire Counties, and then manufactured into copperas at Deptford in Kent County.³⁴ A blue stone found in the hills of Yorkshire and Lancashire was manufactured into alum, as they all also detailed.³⁵ John Harris added a bit of information in 1704 that no subsequent editor opted to copy—the mixing of the stone with human urine. This process presented a problem of fraud “because the Country People who furnish the Work with Urine, do sometimes mingle it with Sea-water, which cannot be discovered by Weight.” The solution was for alum manufacturers to choose their urine suppliers wisely: “They observe that the best Urine for that Purpose, is such as comes from poor labouring People, who drink but little strong Drink.”³⁶

Yet it was rare for editors of commercial dictionaries ever to mention

any of the unskilled labor that went into the process of extraction or manufacture, in Britain, and especially outside Britain. Lac for sealing wax was “brought from the East Indies, particularly Malabar, Bengal, and Pegu,” Rolt told his readers, but he provided no more information beyond these geographical origins.³⁷ How was it collected? How was it stored? How was it transported? In commercial dictionaries where imperial pride and extractive reach outweighed comprehensive economic knowledge, much of the labor remained invisible, and the representation of production selective and incomplete.³⁸ This was imperialism, not—as proclaimed in each of the commercial dictionaries—“universalism.”

Even for mundane consumer goods like stationery supplies, the structures of economic production and labor were vast and complex. For Angell to write a letter in colonial Rhode Island in 1775 meant participating in an economy beyond the Atlantic world to what we might call the “global world,” stretching from England to Europe to northern Africa to the Middle East to India. Historians such as Maxine Berg and Lisa Jardine associate the rise of global trade in early modern Europe and Britain with luxury goods, but many stationery items and ingredients—quills, oak galls, gum arabic, gum sandarac, lac, cinnabar—were stealth commodities rather than glamorous luxuries.³⁹ That might explain why almost no scholarly research has been done on the trade in oak galls or the manufacturing of gum sandarac into pounce, for example. Yet the “consumer revolution” in stationery supplies in the eighteenth century entailed extraction, trade, manufacturing, and employment on a considerable scale. The historian David Hancock has helped us to imagine the high-end British merchants who helped solidify the Atlantic economy and the British empire over the course of the eighteenth century,⁴⁰ but to appreciate the full scope of the Atlantic and the global economy we must imagine not just merchants but an array of lesser occupations and livelihoods as well—a spectrum of affluent, middling, and poor working people inside and outside Britain. For instance, someone had to collect and store oak galls in the Diyarbakir and Mosul regions; someone had to transport them to Aleppo; someone had to ship them from Syria to England; someone had to convert them into either ink or perhaps ink powder in England; someone had to ship them from England to the American colonies; someone had to sell them in the colonies—to someone like Angell, living his quiet life outside Providence, Rhode Island. None of this may have been glamorous or lucrative, but it

amounted to an extraordinary network of extraction, trade, production, and retailing on a global scale. All of this economic production was sufficiently routinized and normalized by the 1750s to escape full treatment in commercial dictionaries boasting completeness and proclaiming universalism.

Many of these economic activities and occupations were largely invisible to contemporaries in the eighteenth century, never mind to scholars since. In 1747, for instance, the author of a London city directory enumerated an extraordinary proliferation of “tradesmen” by then evident in London, the many occupations which comprised the vibrant new manufacturing sector and service economy at the center of the British empire. Robert Campbell could readily identify makers of paper, printers and binders of books, and sellers of stationery, but he had nothing to say about any of the occupations that manufactured quills, penknives, ink, inkpots, ink powder, pounce, sealing wax, or wafers—what he obliquely referred to as “all the other Apparatus belonging to Writing”—never mind the occupations that cultivated and collected the raw materials from which these items were made (Campbell 127).

Just as all these commodities were subordinate, so the people who processed them into manufactures were kept invisible, their occupations unnamed, their livelihoods unacknowledged. Because the representation of production and labor was selective in the commercial dictionaries of the 1750s, so, too, was the representation of the global economy and of Britain’s imperial expansion. It was a global economy emptied of suffering and struggle, and a British empire emptied of violence.⁴¹ It was, instead, a world of palpable opportunity, energy, inventiveness, and improvement for merchants, shopkeepers, and skilled artisans in Britain—thus far (in the mid-eighteenth century) a fairly modest modernity, promising to shine ever brighter in the decades ahead. The editors of commercial dictionaries presented themselves not as at the literal beginning, but as sometime just after the beginning of a historical transformation accelerating into the 1750s and beyond. They constructed an image of productivity centered upon extracted resources and skilled labor, an image of a global economy revolving around the British empire, an image of empire devoid of military conquest or occupation, and an image of world history hinging upon British progress at its vanguard. In doing so, the editors constructed and circulated notions of a productive and extractive imperial modernity

premised on an unwillingness to assign value to unskilled labor and on an inability to see beyond the edge of British imperial reach. Their acts of commission constituted an explicit ideology of modernity, their omissions a fundamental myopia lurking inside a blithely deployed language of “universalism.”

The invisibility of the labor behind the production and trade in stationery supplies in the eighteenth century calls to mind a crucial element of the ideology of modernity prevailing in the United States today, which is to render many kinds of labor and production invisible in a global economy and to see the world through the extractive reach and productive energy of empire.⁴² T. H. Breen is certainly not alone in associating the eighteenth-century Atlantic-world “consumer revolution” with a modernity drawn from status, refinement, and cosmopolitanism. David Hancock, for instance, invokes the same desires and ambitions with respect to the British commercial revolution that he describes from the standpoint of British merchants, rather than colonial consumers as in Breen’s account.⁴³ In a real sense, the production of stationery supplies was tied to a global economy in the eighteenth century, but were these supplies marketed as refined and cosmopolitan? Of the nearly 1,100 advertisements peddling stationery supplies in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* between 1729 and 1796, only 101 (9%) of them identified any particular stationery item geographically, such as “Dutch quills,” “Aleppo ink,” “British ink powder,” and “Irish wafers.” However, this figure is deceptive, as the percentage is actually considerably lower. These individual advertisements contained more than 3,400 single or clustered items related to stationery, and of all these items only 173 (5%) were given a geographical identifier.⁴⁴

This is not, it must be said, to deny the British basis or the Atlantic scale of the “consumer revolution” described by Breen. Certainly many other kinds of consumer goods in the newspaper advertisements were laden with geographical identifiers—assigned special cosmopolitan value because they were, say, “Marseilles quilting” or “Barcelona handkerchiefs” or “German flutes.” With respect to stationery supplies, however, the geographical—the cosmopolitan, the refined—was largely invisible. This invisibility must be given proportionate analytical weight, especially because it indicates the cultural force of another kind of modernity characterizing the middle of the eighteenth century. The vastly greater cultural weight accrues in all those pedestrian newspaper advertisements that simply enu-

merated a stationery item, marketing its utilitarian function rather than any cosmopolitan cachet. Quills were quills; ink was ink; sealing wax was sealing wax. This same utilitarian thrust was evident in newspaper advertising published by the 1730s in all the major port cities at the vanguard of colonial modernity: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Annapolis, and Charleston.⁴⁵

There were also some advertisers who did assign not only utilitarian function but also superior quality to a given stationery item, as in “Writing Paper of the best Quality.”⁴⁶ What was most often a selling point, however, was for an advertiser to proclaim a spectrum of quality for a spectrum of customers, as in “Writing Paper of all Sorts”⁴⁷ or “Writing Paper of different Kinds,”⁴⁸ spanning from the “best” to the “common.” This spectrum of quality was also sometimes true of stationery items given geographical identifiers. For instance, in March 1782 one advertiser offered “Best Dutch Sealing wax”⁴⁹ whereas in January 1783 another offered “middling and common Dutch sealing wax.”⁵⁰ Even in the relatively few times it was invoked, geography did not automatically connote superior quality or refined status. With respect to stationery supplies, something else—practical utility—was doing the greater bulk of the cultural work in the eighteenth century.

While the raw materials of stationery supplies were global in scale, those geographical identifiers actually used by advertisers were primarily British (62%) and Dutch (26%). Here, cachet was assigned not to raw materials, but to manufacturing processes. The world beyond Britain and Holland was limited to four mentions of “Aleppo ink”⁵¹ and ten allusions to “American”⁵² or “Pennsylvania”⁵³ or “Philadelphia.”⁵⁴ Aleppo ink was the one exotic exception to the rule; it was trumpeted as superior in quality based on the source of its raw materials, rather than the place of its manufacturing process. Items identified as American or Pennsylvania or Philadelphia tended to carry a tremendous burden of proof about their worth. For instance, in August 1770 a Philadelphia printer began to sell a “New Invented Philadelphia Ink Powder” which “not only exceeds the European in the Goodness of its Quality, but will be sold by the Quantity as cheap as that can be imported.”⁵⁵ On and on such newspaper advertisements went, their gymnastics of comparison betraying an acute sense of inferiority to be overcome. Meanwhile, no stationery items were ever attributed to the production of other colonies. To the degree that stationery items

were identified geographically by advertisers, they were denoted imperial and Atlantic, rather than global or intercolonial.

But that degree was very small, it must again be emphasized—starkly apparent not in scattered few examples of geographical identifiers that can be found, but in the overwhelming percentage of stationery items where they cannot. The representation of consumption in newspapers such as the *Pennsylvania Gazette* indicates that utilitarian function was another leading symbolic mode of modernity—in the specific case of stationery supplies. There was, in other words, more than one cultural route to modernity in the eighteenth-century anglophone Atlantic world. Beyond the modernity of the refined consumer, there was also the modernity of an extractive and productive empire and the modernity of utilitarian function.

A similar cultural premium on practical utility can be seen in dozens upon dozens of pedagogical books featuring penmanship printed in Britain and either imported to or reprinted in the colonies over the course of the eighteenth century. In the 1710s British penmanship manuals began to pay more attention to the world of commerce and trade. In 1712, for instance, Charles Snell opted to market his standard-issue penmanship manual explicitly to young men preparing themselves “for Business.” Hence, the scripts he demonstrated to his readers would now be less ornate, without the “Owls, Apes, Monsters, and sprig’d Letters” that marred the penmanship manuals of his outdated competitors (Snell, preface). One of his competitors, George Shelley, responded by adding to an upgrade of his penmanship manual not only sample alphabets for students to copy, but sample business forms so that young men would internalize business acumen even as they practiced their handwriting.⁵⁶ By the 1730s, some authors had given over their penmanship manuals entirely to the business world, pitching them to young men “Design’d for Compting Houses, Trade and the Publick Offices” (Bland, title page). Traditional penmanship manuals, John Bland explained, suited people who practiced penmanship “meerly as an Art” rather than in the service of business. Bland himself favored “Neatness and Boldness of the writing” over “useless Ornaments” (Bland, preface). Unimportant in penmanship manuals of the seventeenth century, utilitarian function was becoming paramount in the early eighteenth century. First it was quietly included, and soon it was advocated for.

In their turn, in the 1730s, writers of business manuals began to pay more attention to the skill of penmanship. In 1738, for instance, William

Markham published *A General Introduction to Trade and Business* to indoctrinate young men into the array of skills necessary to qualify themselves for an increasingly complex business world. These skills included arithmetic and business documentation, and also grammar and penmanship (Markham, title page). Indeed, Markham began his chapter on penmanship with a pompous account of the ancient history of writing, paper, pen, and ink. “Our Forefathers,” he explained, “for many Years, practic’d a small Running Secretary Hand; and about Sixty Years ago, it was as great a Rarity to meet with a Person who had not been so taught, as it is now to meet with one that is.” Presenting himself as a modernist, Markham favored a newer script called the round hand and notable for “its natural Tendency to facilitate and dispatch Business” (Markham 52–53). This may have been its natural tendency, according to Markham, but learning the round hand required elaborate instruction from the author and rigorous discipline from the reader. He filled paragraph upon paragraph of the chapter with elaborate instructions on how to prepare a quill for writing, how to hold a pen while writing, how to sit at a table when writing, and how to do them all precisely and properly (Markham 54–57).

Once premised simply on mechanically copying sample alphabets, penmanship instruction became increasingly based on intellectual mastery of written instructions, the mind controlling the body. In 1744, the author of another penmanship manual could fill 30 interminable pages with such instructions.⁵⁷ This might seem astonishingly rudimentary and downright absurd if we do not remember that, like using a laptop in the early 1990s, handling quill and ink amounted to a new technology for many people in the mid-eighteenth century—it required a manual. Indeed, the 1748 edition of George Fisher’s *The American Instructor*, the first colonial reprint of a popular British business manual, started its instructions at the exceedingly basic gathering phase.⁵⁸ What should you do if you want to write a letter? “First, ’tis necessary to be provided with the following Implements, viz. good Pens, good and free Ink, and also good Paper . . . a flat Ruler . . . with a Leaden Plummet or Pencil to rule Lines . . . Also Gum Sandrick Powder, (or Pounce as they call it) . . . smooth it with the Haft of the Penknife” (Fisher 27). These “Directions for Beginners” ran through the usual basics: how to prepare a quill for writing, how to hold a quill when actually writing, and how to make ink by mixing together some “Galls of Aleppo . . . Copperas . . . Gum Arabick . . . [and] Roche Allom.” Done right, the

manual promised, the ink mixture would be ready “in about a Month’s time” (Fisher 43–44).

Penmanship manual after penmanship manual, and business manual after business manual, proceeded along these same technical lines — how to make ink, how to prepare a quill, how to hold the quill in one’s hand, how to sit while writing. What required mastery was preparation and use of quill and ink, not selecting the right quill or the right ink. In other words, it was a practical task of technique, not a consumer task of choice. A British manual from 1799 hinted at a new approach to stationery supplies to augur in the nineteenth century, throwing the cultural paradigm of the eighteenth century into relief. Here was a manual written by someone who proudly undertook the “profession of a Pen-Cutter” by pursuing the “Art of Making Pens Scientifically” (Wilkes 3, title page). And here were new consumer imperatives, since this professional boasted knowing where to get not only the “best manufactured Penknives” but even the ideal sharpening stone recommended by a “celebrated Mineralist in Derbyshire.” Meantime, the perfect quills apparently came from “Hambro’ by Jews travelling through Poland,” although quills from either Ireland or Hudson Bay might suffice (Wilkes 11–17, 33–35). The author filled his manual with his own variation on the usual practical techniques, but he revealed an alertness to consumer choices. Quills were no longer just quills, ink no longer just ink, sealing wax no longer just sealing wax. It would increasingly matter where they came from and who made them, but this was a cultural step — another kind of modernity, one more refined than practical — made only at the end of the eighteenth century with respect to stationery supplies.

The cultural choice and social act of writing letters situated someone like Israel Angell — he of the “bad Pen and poor Ink” in 1775 — within a British empire and within a global economy. That economy included the extraction of raw materials as far away from Britain as the Middle East, northern Africa, and India; the manufacture of stationery items in Holland and Britain; and the selling of those items in the American colonies. Assembling pen and ink from raw materials and getting them into the ultimate possession of Israel Angell, poised to write a letter, involved an elaborate network of places and occupations, of production and trade. Even if the full scale and scope of this network was not recognized by people in the eighteenth century, it is important for the scholar to reconstruct as well as

to interrogate. For one, it allows us to broaden our understanding of the “consumer revolution” of the eighteenth century—part of which was undoubtedly inspired by the desire for new material objects associated with refinement and cosmopolitanism. Yet the eighteenth-century representation of production and consumption with respect to buying and using stationery supplies indicates that another part was inspired by a desire for practical function and technical mastery. For another, it allows us to appreciate the myopia of the middle class in Britain and in the colonies who most energetically patronized the new consumer culture of letter writing in the eighteenth century. Although that culture tied them into global, Atlantic, imperial, and local circuits of labor, production, and trade, their investment in letter writing failed to carry due recognition of any geographies or relations of power. The material culture of letter writing may have been global, but its consumer culture was not.

Much recent scholarship on the “consumer revolution” in the eighteenth century has been premised on a demand- and desire-driven narrative. Hence the prevailing scholarly emphasis on refinement and cosmopolitanism as motivating the middle class to purchase consumer goods, to display their rising status in the world. Not surprisingly, this narrow focus on consumption has provoked criticism for being disconnected from the dramatic consolidation of slavery in the eighteenth century, never mind the broader parallel world of economic production. That is why, analytically, it is crucial to examine the representation of both production and consumption, and to differentiate between material cultural and consumer culture, so as to interrogate rather than reproduce the cultural myopia of the middle class in the eighteenth century. In this way we can avoid a purely desire-driven narrative—one where bourgeois desire translates neatly into “consumer revolution.” By highlighting the cultural importance of utilitarian function and technical mastery in the eighteenth century, we can see an alternate route to modernity for the middle class in the anglophone Atlantic world, one premised not merely on consumer desire but also on the fraught question of personal agency and technical mastery. Am I skilled enough for the modern world?—that was the question with which authors of penmanship manuals and business manuals confronted their middle-class readers.

We can also see a crucial consequence in the accumulation of power and privilege by the middle class over the course of the eighteenth century.

Even though neither their intentions nor actions were overtly concerned with grasping for power or wielding domination, in their avid purchase of books, newspapers, and stationery supplies the middle class nevertheless managed to animate a vast world of extraction, production, and trade far beyond their view or comprehension. A global economy burgeoned; the British empire grew and expanded; the American colonies thrived; slavery expanded; indigenous peoples were increasingly displaced and dispossessed. The middle class in Britain and its American colonies benefited from all this; many others in the world did not. It was the great accomplishment of the middle class to accrue significant economic power over the course of the eighteenth century, and it was its great privilege to do so without recognizing the full terms of that power.

NOTES

This essay is drawn from my book manuscript, *In My Power: Letter Writing in Early America*. Abbreviated versions were presented at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, and at the 2005 annual meeting of the Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture. I would like to thank my fellow panelists, the commentators, audience respondents, Sarah Knott, Alexandra Shepard, and especially Jennifer Baker and Eric Wertheimer for their helpful suggestions.

1. See Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*.
2. The online *Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728–1800* served as my case study of an early American newspaper because it enables systematic keyword searching—in my case of eight stationery goods: paper, quills, penknives, ink, inkpots, pounce, sealing wax, and wafers.
3. Numerous advertisements for stationery goods can be found in two newspapers published in Angell's home colony of Rhode Island: the *Providence Gazette*, established in 1762, and the *Newport Mercury*, established in 1758.
4. See Dierks and Goodman, "The Writing Desk."
5. Although the online *Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728–1800* is ideal for its keyword searchability, I have also scanned extensively through newspapers for Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—all of which corroborate my findings for Pennsylvania.
6. See Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*.
7. See Brown, *A Sense of Things*; Carson, "Material Culture History" 401–28; Hodder, *Reading the Past*.
8. See Clark, *The Public Prints*.

9. On use, as opposed to consumption, see Overton et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households*, and Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World*.
10. The fifth and final edition of this text was published in 1736.
11. The seventh and final edition of this text was published in 1751–1752.
12. See ca.1754 catalog in Hayes, *The Library of William Byrd of Westover*, 293, 455. See 1764 catalog in McCorison, *The 1764 Catalogue of the Redwood Library Company at Newport, Rhode Island*, 8, 69–70. See 1773 catalog in Bond and Amory, *The Printed Catalogues of the Harvard College Library, 1723–1790*, B9, B13.
13. The first city directory in the United States appeared in 1785. See White, *The Philadelphia Directory*.
14. On London city directories in this era, see Atkins, *Directories of London*, ch. 3.
15. This directory would go through 39 editions by 1771.
16. This directory would go through 16 editions by 1780.
17. On commercial dictionaries in this era, see Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 105–6.
18. The first French edition was published in 1723.
19. See Rolt, *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*.
20. On war between Britain and France, see Anderson, *Crucible of War*.
21. In this it might have been influenced by the listings in Campbell's *The London Tradesman*.
22. See the “paper” entry of Postlethwayt's *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*.
23. See Hunter, *Papermaking in Pioneer America*.
24. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 16 September 1742, for an artisanal employment advertisement; 20 July 20 1738, for a runaway laborer advertisement; and 11 April 1734, for a rag collection notice. All three kinds of advertisements would appear in the newspaper repeatedly over the years.
25. See “quill” entry in Rolt's *New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*.
26. Quill making would be listed as a skilled profession in London city directories in the early nineteenth century; the skill came from the precision of cutting, not cleaning. See Finlay, *Western Writing Implements*, ch. 1.
27. See Finlay, *Western Writing Implements*. Chapter 3 discusses penknives; chapter 7 discusses inkpots.
28. For fascination with paper in antiquity, see, for example, the “paper” entry in Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*. For fascination with pen and ink in antiquity, see Markham, *General Introduction to Trade and Business*, 49.
29. On pounce, see Finlay, *Western Writing Implements*, ch. 6.
30. On the sixteenth-century transition from beeswax from England to lac from India, see Finlay, *Western Writing Implements*, ch. 11.
31. Inattention to the global or to the local in the eighteenth century is one of many flaws in the “Atlantic world” paradigm that has been faddish in historical and literary scholarship for the last decade.

32. A quintal was 100 kilograms. See “galls” entries in Rolt, *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, and Chambers, *Cyclopaedia*.
33. See Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity*, 147–48.
34. Under entries for “copperas.”
35. Under entries for “allum.”
36. See “alum-works” entry in Harris, *Lexicon Technicum*.
37. See “lacca” entry in Rolt, *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*. Rolt’s entry was borrowed from the entry for “lacca” in Chambers, *Cyclopaedia*.
38. It must be said that there were other unaccountable omissions closer to the British core of the commercial dictionaries, such as the omission of the patenting of ink powder in 1688 and the patenting of sealing wafers in 1635. See Finlay, *Western Writing Implements*. Chapter 5 discusses inkpowder; chapter 11 discusses wafers.
39. See Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, and Jardine, *Worldly Goods*.
40. See Hancock, *Citizens of the World*.
41. On the militarism underpinning British imperialism, see Colley, *Captives*, and Brewer, *Sinews of Power*.
42. In my own culpable case, I might spend countless hours on my laptop scrutinizing online editions of early modern books and newspapers, but I do not devote nearly enough time to thinking about the young women who assembled my laptop in some distant country, in poisonous and militarized conditions, as fundamentally inflicted and dictated by the empire in whose “heartland” I live. For a similar point within a theoretical context, see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 314–15.
43. See also Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ch. 8.
44. This, too, is deceptive, since my database is for the moment organized by clustered rather than individual items. Were the clustered items all disaggregated into single ones, the percentage of stationery supplies identified geographically would be considerably lower. For instance, wafers were advertised in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* 205 times between 1729 and 1796, but only 3 times with a geographical identifier.
45. By the 1730s there were three newspapers published in Boston, two in New York City, two in Philadelphia, one in Annapolis, and one in Charleston.
46. For some instances of this phrase, see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 17 January 1781; 30 July 1783; 2 March 1785.
47. For some instances of this phrase, see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1 October 1747; 5 October 1749; 10 May 1750.
48. For some instances of this phrase, see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 16 April 1748, 21 June 1764; 28 May 1772.
49. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 27 March 1782.
50. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 24 September 1783.
51. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 8 July 1731; 29 August 1734; 1 September 1737; 17 January 1781.

52. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 30 August 1759; 12 March 1772; 11 August 1773; 27 April 1774; 14 October 1789.
53. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 13 July 1769; 11 November 1772.
54. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 5 April 1770; 30 August 1770; 5 November 1788.
55. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 30 August 1770.
56. See Shelley, *The Second Part of Natural Writing*. Just a few years before, the original edition of Shelley's book included only the usual alphabets and sayings, but not business documents. See Shelley, *Natural Writing in all the hands*.
57. See Leekey, *A Discourse on the Use of the Pen*.
58. The first American edition was based on the ninth British edition.

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