

## The Plinies in the Early United States

The influence of the classics on the early United States is well known (e.g., Reinhold 1984, Richard 1994 on founding fathers, Winterer 2007 on American women and classics, among many others). Cicero and Vergil, Homer and Thucydides, even Cornelius Nepos filled textbooks, formed the basis of classical learning from elementary school to college, and dominated intellectual life. These figures from the ancient Greek and Roman world were not alone, however, in shaping students. Also influential, but less discussed in this context, were the Plinies, both Pliny the Younger and Pliny the Elder. Although their presence is not as extensive as others, the Plinies appear in speeches and letters, in textbooks and children's books, and provide us with another avenue through which we can continue to assess the influence of the Roman world on the young United States.

A cursory list of Plinian appearances demonstrates their widespread appeal. George Washington's eulogy, for example, delivered in 1800 before the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati, by Major William Jackson, secretary-general of the Cincinnati, included two lines from Pliny the Younger. An entirely different medium, Thomas Jefferson's house at Monticello, contained elements indicated as worthwhile in Pliny's description of his own house, including a weathervane manipulated inside the house (Lehman 1973:52). Perhaps more expectedly, we meet Pliny the Younger in another letter writer, John Adams, who declared Pliny's letters "too studied and elegant" in a letter to Benjamin Rush in 1812 (Adair and Schutz 1966: 263). Similarly, the Virginian plantation owner Landon Carter demonstrated familiarity with Pliny the Younger's letters, even agreeing with his commentary on the dangers of slaves (after the murder of a master, Pliny 3.14.5). Carter owned a copy of a translation of Pliny the Younger, and scrawled in the margins of this letter that Pliny's observation was just (Isaac 2004: 94). Perhaps

not surprisingly, but unusually, the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture used Pliny the Elder in their description of an annoying pest, the slug worm. Lastly, again to a very different audience, Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* became a source of interesting tidbits about the natural world for young boys and girls in a juvenile book, entitled *The boys' and girls' Pliny*, a book that reached 364 pages.

In a nation keen on classicism, lessons learned in Roman republicanism and oratory, and the values of an agrarian society, the Plinies, with their experience in science and government, earned a respected position in the young United States. This paper will look to examine the extent of the study of the Plinies in the United States and assess and analyze their impact.

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