

Early American Literature

Early American Literature – Overview & Key Points

1. Historical Context (1600-1830)

Period	Major Events	Literary Impact
Colonial Era (1607-1763)	Settlement of Jamestown (1607)	Writing primarily functional (laws, sermons, diaries)
	- Pilgrims at Plymouth (1620) - French & Indian War (1754-1763)	Emergence of Puritan religious prose and poetry
Revolutionary Era (1763-1789)	- American Revolution (1775-1783) - Declaration of Independence (1776)	- Political pamphlets, essays, and speeches become central (e.g., <i>Common Sense</i>) - Birth of a distinct “American voice”
Early Republic (1789-1830)	- Constitution ratified (1788) - Westward expansion, the “Frontier” - Rise of nationalism	- Romanticism, nationalism, and the “American character” dominate - Growth of periodicals and a reading public

2. Genres & Forms

Genre	Characteristics	Representative Works
Religious & Moral Prose	Didactic, Biblical allusions, sermons	<i>The Bay Psalm Book</i> (1640), <i>Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God</i> (1741)
Travel & Frontier Writing	First-hand accounts, wilderness description, “sublime” nature	<i>Letters from an American Farmer</i> (John Dickinson, 1768)
Political Pamphlet	Persuasive, concise, aimed at public opinion	<i>Common Sense</i> (Thomas Paine, 1776)
Essay & Periodical Literature	Emerging magazines, literary criticism, cultural commentary	<i>The Port Folio</i> (1795-1827), <i>The North American Review</i> (1815-)

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Poetry	Simple meter, biblical rhythm ? later more varied forms; emphasis on nature & patriotism	<i>The Day of Doom</i> (Samuel Danforth, 1662), <i>The Song of Hiawatha</i> (Longfellow, 1855—though post-early period, shows legacy)
Early Fiction (Novels & Short Stories)	Moral instruction, sentimentalism, frontier adventure	<i>The Power of Sympathy</i> (William Hill Brown, 1789), <i>The Last of the Mohicans</i> (James Fenimore Cooper, 1826)
Native American Oral Traditions (transcribed)	Myth, legend, oral storytelling; later recorded by European settlers	<i>The Iroquois Confederacy</i> narratives (recorded by Joseph Brant, 1780s)

3. Major Authors & Contributions

Author	Lifespan	Notable Works	Significance
John Winthrop	1587? 1649	<i>A Model of Christian Charity</i> (1630)	Articulated “city upon a hill” ideal; foundational Puritan political theology
Anne Bradstreet	1612? 1672	<i>The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America</i> (1650)	First published poet in the colonies; blended personal voice with biblical themes
Jonathan Edwards	1703? 1758	<i>Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God</i> (1741)	Exemplifies the “Great Awakening” rhetoric; powerful revivalist sermon
Thomas Paine	1737?180		