

**John Leacock commonplace book**  
**1768-1781**  
**Mss.B.L463**

American Philosophical Society  
2003  
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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	American Philosophical Society
<b>Creator</b>	Leacock, John,1729-1802.
<b>Title</b>	John Leacock commonplace book
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1768-1781
<b>Call number</b>	Mss.B.L463
<b>Extent</b>	1.0 Volume(s)
<b>Extent</b>	1 vol., 58p.; 0.1 linear feet
<b>Location</b>	LH-MV-E-3
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Container</b>	1
<b>Abstract</b>	<p>Having made his fortune as a goldsmith and silversmith, John Leacock (1729-1802) became one of Philadelphia's most energetic entrepreneurs in viticulture and a playwright and parodist in the cause of American Independence.</p> <p>Despite bearing the title, "Observations, Experiments etc. extracted from the <i>Philosophical Transactions</i> respecting farming, gardening, etc.," the notebook kept by the silversmith, viticulturist, and writer, John Leacock, is actually a combination of commonplace book, notebook, and receipt book. Consisting of 58 folio pages, the book contains a hodgepodge of entries reflecting Leacock's varied interests from 1768 through at least 1781, including not only material copied from other sources on viticulture, agriculture, engraving and etching, but medicinal and culinary receipts</p>

and two original poems, a "Song [of] the Stamp Act" and "A parody on the Tempest, by R. H. Esq." It also mentions diet drinks made by James Logan and Cadwallader Evans.

**Preferred Citation**

Cite as: John Leacock, Commonplace book, American Philosophical Society.

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## Background note

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The goldsmith and silversmith John Leacock was born in Philadelphia in 1729 into a family of rising fortunes. His father, also named John Leacock, was an established pewterer and merchant and a vestryman at Christ's Church, and his mother, Mary Cash (first cousin once removed of Deborah Read Franklin), was a sister of one of the founding members of the prestigious fishing club, the Colony in Schuylkill.

Leacock was probably apprenticed in his early teens to either a gold- or silversmith, possibly Philip Syng, but regardless of how he entered the trade, success came rapidly to him. By the time he turned 23, he was earning a sufficient living to marry Hannah McCally, and after he received a sizable inheritance from his father in 1753, he removed to a new shop on Front Street, the heart of Philadelphia's silver and gold trade. Skilled in both metals, he advertised small swords, tea services, snuff and patch boxes, buckles, buttons, and a wide variety of other goods, as well as elegant silver plate. Helped, undoubtedly, by his kinship with brothers-in-law David Hall and James Read, not to mention the Franklins, Leacock found a ready market for his wares among the colonial elite of Philadelphia and his social stock rose accordingly. Signs of his increasing social standing include his signature on the 1754 petition to build St. Peter's Church, and his admission to membership in 1759 as the 88th member of the Colony in Schuylkill.

Like many successful Philadelphia merchants and craftsmen of the period, once he had amassed his fortune, Leacock began a gradual removal from his trade into a sort of active, landed retirement. In 1767, shortly before his wife died, he purchased a 28 acre plantation in Lower Merion Township west of Philadelphia, and set about raising a mixed crop of wheat, buckwheat, vegetables, and fruit, and maintaining the usual variety of livestock. Prompted by an open letter from Edward Antill to the American Philosophical Society in the following year, Leacock also began experimenting with vine cultivation. His success encouraged Leacock on December 29, 1772, to propose a scheme to the APS to establish, as he put it, a "public vineyard by subscription, for the good of all the Provinces." Situated on his plantation, this vineyard would serve essentially as a clearinghouse for the cultivation of as many different varieties of grape as could be obtained, and these would be exported and adapted to other regions of the country. Cuttings, he noted in an advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, were to be made available to the public free of charge as a gift to the future of the country. In 1773, Leacock held a "Public Vineyard Cash Lottery" to help finance his venture.

In retirement, Leacock also became increasingly engaged in politics. A member of the Society of the Sons of Saint Tammany and one of the signatories of the Non-Importation resolution of 1765, he was associated with the Revolutionary faction in Philadelphia from its earliest days. He was best known, however, as a parodist and playwright in the cause of independence, and was said to have been as popular a writer in the 1770s as Francis Hopkinson. His biblical parodic satire "The First Book of the American Chronicles of the Times" was widely reprinted in newspapers, and he was equally well known for his play, "The Fall of British Tyranny" (1776). Consequently, when British forces occupied Philadelphia in 1777, Leacock thought it wise to joined the exodus to Reading, where he became one of only 27 men authorized by the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania to sign bills of credit for the United States.

After the British threat was turned away, Leacock left his farm in the care of his brother and returned to the city. He was appointed coroner in 1785, holding that office for 17 years, and he also ran an inn on Water Street between Arch and Race. During the last decade of his life, he and his second with Martha Ogilby (whom he had married on October 7, 1771) resided at 10 South Fifth Street. Leacock died quietly at home on November 16, 1802, and was buried at Christ Church.

## Scope & content

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Despite bearing the title, "Observations, Experiments etc. extracted from the *Philosophical Transactions* respecting farming, gardening, etc.," the notebook kept by the silversmith, viticulturist, and writer, John Leacock, is actually a combination of commonplace book, notebook, and receipt book. Consisting of 58 folio pages, the book contains a hodgepodge of entries reflecting Leacock's varied interests from 1768 through at least 1781, including not only material copied from other sources on viticulture, agriculture, engraving and etching, but medicinal and culinary receipts and two original poems, a "Song [of] the Stamp Act" and "A parody on the Tempest, by R. H. Esq." Although Leacock appears to have intended to keep his entries in roughly alphabetical order, the actual organization (as typical of the genre) is somewhat chaotic.

As the misleading title might suggest, the volume was probably begun after Leacock's purchase of his plantation in Lower Merion. Many of the entries pertain directly to his newly begun agricultural pursuits, with an emphasis upon viticulture. In addition to some general -- and extensive -- notes on planting, watering, and manures and composting, Leacock recorded "A new invented method of hatching chickens expeditiously," information of treating young turkeys, information on the culture of rhubarb, asparagus, and strawberries, and sparse notes on his planting, vine setting, and calving. More interesting, however, are the information he collected on vines and wine making, including "Method of making wine of the white grape," "Method of making currant wine at Bethlehem," "Memorandum of vines planted," "Method of improving weak wines," "Of Grafting vines," and "Directions from Mr. Henry Hill for the culture of vines of the natural produce of this country." A few are extracted from identified sources, including "The method of curing grapes for raisins," which was taken from the *APS Transactions*.

Although Leacock was no longer active as a silversmith during the period he kept this commonplace book, he maintained an interest in some aspects of the craft, particularly etching and engraving. Several entries relate to techniques for engraving, including "Preparation of black printing ink for engravings on copper or other nice purposes," "Engraving water... clouds... landscapes," "Method of applying the soft varnish to the plate and blacking," and notes on engraving hair. There is also a receipt for "Aquafortis for etching for hard and soft varnish." Other notes suggest wider interests, including notes on preparing ivory for miniature painting and an entry "Of the Conversion of glass in porcelain (or China ware) according to the method invented by Mr. Raumur [sic]."

Two apparently original poems appear in the volume, both with overtones relating to different phases of the struggle for independence. His "Song [of] the Stamp Act" is a doggerel-like political parody typified by the quatrain:

Finally, receipts of various sorts are scattered throughout the volume, including medicinal recipes for "fever and ague," yellow fever, tooth ache, "Slow Fever," rabies, and "fumigation powder to prevent the plague and yellow fever," and miscellaneous notes for the preparation of bird lime, bologna sausages,

curing beef and pork, and brewing beer. Leacock also records the recipes for diet drinks by James Logan and Cadwalader Evans and, presumably unrelated, a detailed method for catching rats.



## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2003

## Provenance

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### Acquisition Information

Gift of Mrs. Malcolm G. Sausser, 1953.

### Processing Information

Recatalogued rsc September 2003.

## Related Materials

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### Related Material

The APS contains several letters and copies of letters from or relating to John Leacock. These include:

- Leacock, John to Thomas Coombe, Dec. 29, 1772 (Mss Communications to the APS). Enclosing Leacock to APS, same date.
- Leacock, John to APS, Dec. 29, 1772 (Mss Communications to the APS). re: scheme for subscription vineyard.
- Leacock, John receipt to Deborah Franklin, Feb. 7, 1759 (B F85 66:95a). Receipt for purchase of spoon and tongs
- Davis, William, account with Martha Leacock, Nov. 23, 1802 (Misc. Mss.). Copy of bond for inventory of John Leacock's estate.
- Davis, William, account with Martha Leacock, March 16, 1804 (Misc. Mss.). Copy regarding John Leacock's estate.
- Leacock, Mary Cash, DS, Dec. 4, 1752 (Misc. Mss.). Copy of bond to complete inventory of John Leacock Sr's estate.
- Leacock, Samuel Richards, DS with William Swain, March 21, 1833 (Misc. Mss.). Copy of indenture.
- Ogilby, Joseph, DS, Dec. 2, 1802 (Misc. Mss.). Copy of inventory of John Leacock Jr's estate.

## Indexing Terms

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## Genre(s)

- Commonplace Book
- Commonplace books.
- Miscellaneous
- Poetry
- Receipt books

## Personal Name(s)

- Evans, Cadwalader, 1716-1773
- Logan, James, 1674-1751

## Subject(s)

- Agriculture--Pennsylvania
- Grapes
- Literature, Arts, and Culture
- Silversmiths--Pennsylvania
- Stamp Act, 1765
- United States--History--Revolution, 1775-1783
- Viticulture--Pennsylvania
- Yellow fever

## Other Descriptive Information

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MICROFILM FRAME NO.664

## Other Descriptive Information

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This is the commonplace book of John Leacock, a prominent Philadelphian. Its MOLE description is very detailed and complete. The entries touch on a wide range of subjects and topics, including medicine, politics, poetry, literature, social life, and food and drink.

## Bibliography

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- Cabeen, Francis von A., "The Society of the Sons of Saint Tammany of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 26 (1902): 220.
- Dallett, Francis James, "John Leacock and the Fall of British Tyranny," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 78 (1954): 456-475.
- Mulford, Carla, *John Leacock's The First Book of the American Chronicles of the Times, 1774-1775*. (Newark, Del., 1987).
- Mulford, Carla, "John Leacock's A New Song, On the Repeal of the Stamp Act." *Early American Literature* 15 (1980): 188-93.