

Connections 2010 Abstract

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Abstract Title: Tarleton Lee: A Case Study in Book Distribution

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Abstract:

Tarleton Lee of Shelby County, Kentucky, died in 1847. The records from the estate sale listed the titles of nine books that were sold from his personal library. How did these items come into the possession of the Lee household? Were there literate readers in the home? Were the books owned by Tarleton or others who had come and gone through the household? How and where were the books obtained? This paper explores literacy in rural communities and book distribution in early 19th century Kentucky. The research discusses how the full titles and authors of the nine books were determined from the truncated estate sale list and explores how these items were advertised and distributed in a general manner in the United States. Factors that influenced distribution were variable, particularly along the American frontier.

The paper also focuses on the possible ways that the nine books may have come into the possession of the Lee family and why this was significant in a rural community. The research considers socio-economic factors present in the area during the time period and its positive impact on the literacy level of the free white population. The factors for this portion of the community include religion and social class. The Lees were faithful Baptists and had migrated to the region from Virginia where literacy was more prevalent and the population had easier and more frequent access to reading materials. It was atypical for rural families on the frontier to be fully literate, especially for females. Literacy levels in Shelby County, Kentucky, are discussed and analyzed as to the significance for this rural population who relied on agriculture as their means of income. The definitions of literacy are explored in terms of writing one's name on legal documents vs. reading levels. The growing presence of schools in Shelby County, Kentucky, were also a factor on the increasing level of literacy for the white population in the area.

By focusing on an individual family and using them as a case study to demonstrate literacy levels and channels of book distribution we are able to more clearly understand the ways in which the population came into contact with the current publications of the day. Broadening this scope out to cover a specific community population allows for study of the socio-economic influences on the importance of literacy to these families. Further study of the people who purchased the books at the estate auction and their families can strengthen the arguments about the influence of religion and social background on literacy levels in rural frontier areas as we try discern how literacy was instilled into the culture and why it was seen as a social value worth supporting from one generation to the next.