

Dissertation abstract:

This dissertation, entitled “Knowing in America: Science, Authority and the Early Republic,” analyzes various aspects of scientific practice in the United States from 1789 to 1860. Although scholars have emphasized the important impact of Enlightenment thought on the American founding, the historiography tends to argue for the declining influence of the Enlightenment on American culture as the nineteenth century progressed. In addition, scholars tend to see a decline in American science after Benjamin Franklin as nineteenth-century Americans began to focus mostly on the practical problems of everyday life. The dissertation questions these interpretations by connecting scientific practice in the early republic with transatlantic Enlightenment thought and analyzing American conversations about knowledge creation in practical pursuits such as agriculture. First, the dissertation places American science in the context of Enlightenment debates about how human beings could create knowledge, or epistemology. This part of the dissertation involves a review of American exposure to such Enlightenment thinkers as John Locke, David Hume, and Thomas Reid as well as natural philosophers like Isaac Newton. Then, the dissertation conducts several case studies of different kinds of American science, including agriculture and natural history, and it analyzes how Enlightenment epistemology informed the practice of these sciences in America. The dissertation also investigates how practitioners of these sciences attempted to make their claims credible and authoritative. Finally, the dissertation considers how Enlightenment epistemology and American scientific practice shaped American discourse about political economy and political philosophy. In books and pamphlets that discussed various political issues, American writers attempted to support their arguments by applying what they saw as proper epistemological methods. Through discussion of these topics, the dissertation demonstrates that the Enlightenment continued to make its mark on American culture throughout the early nineteenth century.